

june and july by michellejones

Category: IT (2017), IT - Stephen King

Genre: Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, M/M, and the rest of the losers live in chicago, but he and sonia are divorced, canon can suck my pinky toe, frank is alive!, one big stupid au, so eddie lives in derry, the burn is slow with this one, the summer love au i have been waiting for so i wrote it myself

Language: English

Characters: Ben Hanscom, Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough, Eddie Kaspbrak, Frank Kaspbrak, Georgie Denbrough, Mike Hanlon, Richie Tozier, Sonia Kaspbrak, Stanley Uris

Relationships: Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier

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Summary:

"Is he bothering you?" Bev asked, tossing a knowing look Richie's way—that he caught with a roll of his eyes—putting distance between them.

Eddie blinked. *Yeah*, he wanted to say, *yeah, he's bothering me*. It would've been easier if he had just said it, if he had just told her yes and let her save him from the nicknames and the jokes and the looks and all of it. Maybe, things would have gone differently had he simply said yes. Maybe, if he wasn't three shots in and a terrible lightweight, he would have. But he didn't. Because he looked at Richie, and when he looked at him—really looked—he decided that he didn't really mind being bothered. Not by Richie, anyway.

He sort of liked it.

or Eddie comes home to Chicago for the summer like he always does. He hangs out with Bill, watches bad movies with his dad, and lets Richie Tozier stick a hand in and mix it all up.

1. a dish best served cold

Author's Note:

summer might be ending, but there's no cap on when
i can and can't post a summer love au.

*one winter morning i went for a drive,
i stopped somewhere between june and july
i love these warmer days
but maybe i can't see that the snow's still falling
i only see the gift my heart just brought me*

i need it, frank ocean

At the tender age of six, a little Eddie Kaspbrak knew that he was doomed. Doomed, because his life—though it had barely begun—sucked.

Sure, having lived barely half a decade, there was a lot he didn't know.

This, though? Oh, this he knew for certain.

No one could tell him that he was wrong. No one could tell him that his lousy fate wasn't sealed. Nothing would change his mind. The proof was in the pudding that was his life: a dish best served cold. At the time, he hadn't known how to describe it. But from breaking his wrist after falling off his bike the first day he rode it without training wheels, to the first day of kindergarten when his lunch was a handful of grass courtesy of Belch Huggins—it wasn't long before he saw a pattern.

Being that wherever he existed, bad luck followed. Tethered itself to him like the strings of a puppet. From the shadows it taunted him;

that gut-wrenching, Something Bad is Going To Happen feeling.

The same feeling that swarmed his insides, just one week after his sixth birthday, when his parents sat him down in the dining room that they never ate in—so he knew it must be super important—and told him that they were getting ‘divorced’.

Unfazed, he blinked at them for several moments. In silence, he wondered what that even meant—divorce? It sounded fancy; something that rich old people said; like the ones he watched in those old black and white movies his ma liked so much.

But it seemed made up. A fake word, almost. So why was his dad using it? He wasn’t a classy billionaire or a charming businessman. He was Dad. He said things like ‘hullabaloo’ and ‘curmudgeon’—not strange words like ‘divorce’.

It was clear by the expression he wore that his father had realized his son’s impassiveness. After he spared a glance to his mother—who was too occupied with excessively blowing her nose into her tissue to notice—he turned back to Eddie solemnly. Before he spoke again, he reached for Eddie’s hand and pulled it into his gently.

“Well, it means that Momma and I aren’t going to be together anymore, bud.” He said quietly, in that Super Serious voice he only used when he really meant something. When he needed Eddie to understand; it was the same voice he used when he told Eddie not to cross streets without looking both ways or holding his hand or his Ma’s, told him not to speak to strangers, or tell anyone his home phone number.

Still, Eddie didn’t understand. Furrowing his brows in confusion, he peered up at his dad, hoping maybe the answer would reveal itself eventually. Inside his head, a whirlwind of questions arose: Was someone going somewhere? Moving away? Was this how those kids in *Annie* got sent to those scary orphanages?

None of them seemed right, so he asked what seemed the only plausible question to ask, “Am I in trouble?”

At that, his father’s face blanked momentarily. Then, with eyebrows

drawn in and a confused look shot toward his mother, quickly asked, "What?"

Eddie sighed as if his parents were taking up too much of his important six-year-old time. "Am I in trouble?" He repeated. "Is that why you and Momma aren't gonna be to-get-her anymore?" He just couldn't wrap his head around it. None of it made any sense.

Suddenly, his mother exploded into sobs so loud that Eddie wanted to cover his ears. However, his father seemed unperturbed. Just simply ran a hand down his tired and sad looking face, and squeezed Eddie's hand lightly to grab his attention.

"No, buddy. This isn't because of anything you've done." He assured him. Eddie noticed that his eyes were sparkling; they looked wet. "This isn't your fault, okay?"

Eddie slowly nodded his head twice to demonstrate that yes, he understood. Despite the overwhelming sense of disarray he still felt. Despite all the questions that continued to rack up in his mind. Despite not understanding one bit of what his father was trying to tell him.

Apparently, his father could see the wheels turning in his young son's head. So, carefully and quietly, using words he knew Eddie would understand, he explained the situation to him. "We still love each other very much," he said earnestly, "and we love you so, so much, kiddo. To Jupiter and back. That's never gonna change, alright? Ma and I just need some time apart."

Several moments and facial expressions later, Eddie thought he maybe had an idea of what his father was telling him. "Like a time out?" He asked curiously, his eyebrows pulled in tight.

Laughing slightly, though still sounding and looking very sad, his father nodded. "Yeah, bug, kind of like a timeout."

For what felt like hours and hours, they talked and talked and talked—or rather, his father did and his mother continued to cry beside him. All the while, Eddie sat his straightest and listened his best, but as as his father attempted to clarify the meaning of the situation and

told him what would happen next, he couldn't help but stare at his mother.

Cheeks red and blotchy and wet from her tears, a tissue pressed to her running nose, Sonia looked anywhere but at his father or him. Every time his dad tried to touch her shoulder or grab her hand, she wretched herself away from him like he had cooties or something. Eddie wondered if she would react the same way had he tried to hold her hand, too. He didn't try to find out.

After his father finished speaking, he leaned back and asked Eddie if he understood now, asked him what he thought. Focusing on the three freckles on his father's forehead, Eddie mulled it over despite having decided a long time ago how he felt about this whole thing. As soon as he figured he had spent enough time pretending to think about it, he looked his father in the eye. Then, with his arms folded tightly across his chest and his lips pushed out into a petulant pout and his nose turned upward, he declared, "This sucks."

Which is exactly what his best friend, Bill Denbrough, said after Eddie explained the whole thing during lunch recess the next day. They were digging in the sand pit for buried treasure.

Once Eddie determined that their search was fruitless, he fell back onto his butt and told Billy everything his dad had told him.

When Eddie finished, he joined him in the sand. "Yo-you can come live wuh-wuh-with me if yuh-you wuh-want, Ed!" He offered with a kind smile. "I w-would rather have you as a b-br-brother, any-wuh-way," he said with a sad little sigh.

Though Eddie didn't know it then, the Talk In the Dining Room was just the beginning of all the sucky things coming his way. Three months later, he and his mother packed up their things and moved across the country to a town in the middle of nowhere—"Derry, Maine," his mother told him, "your new home, Eddie Bear."

It was for the best, his parents tried to convince him. "It's what your mother wants," his father said to him one night, when it was just the two of them up in his bedroom, "it'll be okay, Bug. You'll see."

For the first time in his life, Eddie thought his father was a Big Fat Liar.

Because how could he say that? Nothing was going to be okay ever again! His parents were breaking up—that's what Bill called it—and now he had to move away from his dad and his best friend and his house and his neighborhood and everything just *sucked*. Which, despite being told several times not to use that word, was what he told anyone who asked him.

When his aunts came to help them move and they asked how he was doing he proclaimed, rather loudly, that he sucked (he still didn't have a clear understanding of how to use his new favorite phrase.) *What do you think of your new house? It sucks. Are you excited to start school? No, it's going to suck.*

People asked him questions everyday, and he was getting sick of it. The worst part was that out of everything they asked him, nobody ever asked him what he wanted.

If they had ever thought to ask, he would have said that he didn't want to move, that he liked his house now. Maybe school wasn't his favorite, but Billy was there and he more than made up for stupid bullies. He didn't want to leave his dad *or* Billy. He didn't want to *leave* at all. If Eddie could have had it his way, he would've put his parents in separate houses right next to each other. Then, they wouldn't have to live together anymore. They would just be neighbors, and Eddie wouldn't have to live with just one of them; he could live with both of them! At the same time! It made perfect sense! The perfect plan—he didn't see why they couldn't at least *try* it.

But the absolute suckiest part was the “arrangement” (as his parents called it.) Which was what the lawyer apparently decided would be best for Eddie and his “well-being” (as his mother told him), whatever that meant.

Mr. Lawyer, who had only ever met Eddie like, twice, for approximately five minutes, felt he knew Eddie well enough to decide that during the school year, Eddie would stay with his mother. Then, during the summer, he would stay with his father. Which Eddie knew

was totally unfair, because the school year was like, nine months! And the summer was only three! That was barely any time to do all the things he liked to do with his dad, like go grocery shopping or go to the pool or go bowling or watch him work on the car in the garage, go to the movies or have any kind of fun!

His ma hated all that stuff. How was he supposed to survive nine whole months without fun?

She didn't have patience to shop, or drive him to the pool, or the bowling alley. Cars were dangerous, the movie theater was too dark, and one time she told him that fun wasn't for grown ups—they simply didn't have the time.

"That's why your daddy does all that stuff with you, munchkin," she sighed, "because he isn't a grown up."

Which, to Eddie, sounded great. *That* made sense. No wonder his dad was so much fun!—he wasn't a boring adult like his mom or his teachers. He had time—he made time.

But moving to Maine meant that Eddie would lose that. No more Sunday Fun Days with Dad. No more pancakes in the morning, no more Saturday morning cartoons, trips to the batting cages while Ma was with her friends. No more *fun*.

Who was going to do all that stuff with him? It certainly would not be his mother, who was always too busy with bridge club meetings and book club stuff to do any thing other than berate him for not wearing enough sunscreen. Sure, she read him bed time stories and he liked when she played with his hair to help him fall asleep, but she wasn't *fun*. Not like Dad.

That, perhaps, was the worst part of the entire No Good Sucky thing. His mother was not his father and she never would be. But that never stopped Eddie from wishing that it was his father he got to stay with and not her. That she was the one who had to sit at home all alone and wait for him to come home just for the summer, just giving her barely enough time to bond with him. That it was her he was leaving behind. Her that he only called on the weekends. He wished it so bad, all the time, from the moment he woke up to the moment he

went to sleep. *I wish it was you.* Whenever he looked at her it was all he could think about. It was almost obsessive, the way he chanted it in his head as he brushed his teeth in the morning or sat across from her at breakfast. The mantra replayed itself over and over until all he could do was resent her.

And God, he had so many reasons to. Obviously, when he was five they had been limited to the divorce and the move and the fact that she left his father in the first place. But by the time he was nine, he had curated a multiple paged list. From small things like how much she washed her hands to the bigger, more important stuff—like the way her face crumpled up into an ugly scowl any time he mentioned his father.

After he turned thirteen, he was certain he hated everything about her.

Eddie hated that she only smiled when she was actually upset. He hated how often she watched *The Price Is Right*. That she refused to buy anything but TV dinners and hid her Hostess snacks from him. The clothes she made him wear; how short she made him cut his hair. Or that she yelled at him for running out of mass after the pastor's wife commented on his “awfully feminine appearance” instead of defending him. He hated that of all places, she chose Derry. Sometimes, it felt as though she did it on purpose—like she somehow knew about all the dirty looks and judging eyes that would follow him no matter where he went; like she hoped they would remind him where his place was.

The very second they entered Derry, he swore the air shifted around the town. Everything seemed cold and far away; separated from life outside of the city's limits. Like the town itself was surrounded by some impenetrable forcefield, what with its Too Old citizens and outdated buildings, the cracks in the street and the eerie way everything seemed to be drained of color.

Even at six, Eddie knew that there was something wrong with the terribly abysmal town of Derry. Felt it in his gut, his soul, his heart—everywhere.

So naturally, summer was his favorite part of every year. Because

summer meant leaving Derry, leaving his mother and going home. Summer meant he got to see his father in person; that he wasn't just some voice he heard on the phone; meant that he got to see Billy again and remember what it was like to have a friend because the kids at his new school wanted nothing to do with him and he wanted absolutely nothing to do with them, either. Every June felt like freedom; July, true liberation and August, the rapture. The only three months each year of his pathetically dull life that he knew would be nothing short of pure bliss—so long as he was miles away from Derry, Maine.

So, it was no surprise that his hopes for his much anticipated vacation from Hell were at an all time high. And when June tenth finally, *finally*, came around and all he had left to do was pack his bathroom bag once he brushed his teeth, there was no hiding the eager smile on his face or the carefree bounce in his step. Even if he wanted to, he wouldn't have been able—it seemed the muscles in his face were stuck in place, glued down by the sheer joy that electrified his body whenever he remembered that his time in Derry was nearing its end.

No more quiet whispers in town any time he passed, no more weekly visits to the pharmacy or forced conversations with Mr. Keene (whose smile reminded Eddie of a puppets—controlled by something unseen). No more flickering street lights or hauntingly dark and long roads. No more atomic wedgies, no more slurs scribbled on the front of his locker, no more wondering who would see him at the grocery store this time.

No more fear, no more loneliness, but most importantly, no more *fucking Derry*.

There had been a time when he feared this day would never come—the day that he left and left for good. But as he took one last look around his room, at his packed suitcases sat idle in his doorway, his blue comforter tucked tightly underneath his mattress, the neatly pressed shirts left hanging in his now bare closet, the organized stacks of papers he didn't need but kept anyway placed at the corner of his desk, and the framed photo of him at age five sitting on his mother's lap at the last birthday party he ever had left on his bedside table—he was met with a sense of finality he almost hadn't expected.

It was his room, there were enough things resemble that it was and had been for years, but now, not quite enough remained to show that it was still his—that it ever would be again.

His ma, of course, was oblivious to the whole thing. For all the things she paid attention to, it seemed that his newfound sense of freedom was not one of them. She didn't even question why he needed two suitcases instead of one, or why his room looked so empty. She simply asked if he remembered his sunscreen and that was that. *Good*, Eddie thought. He needed her ignorance—with it, his plan to never come back was concrete. So long as she thought he was coming home in three months, his independence was tangible.

The drive to the airport was silent—radio was “too much of a distraction” and Sonia never liked to talk much when dropping Eddie off to fly home to his father. Aside from her usual lectures about his medicine and his diet, she kept quiet generally.

In his own respective silence, Eddie watched the town pass by in a blur of brick buildings and blooming trees. The summer solstice certainly made Derry more saturated, but he was no fool. No amount of greens and blues and yellows could distract him from the truth of Derry’s obtuseness. He had seen the face behind the mask too many times to ever forget it.

It wasn’t long before they came up on the **Leaving Derry** sign just on the outskirts of the town, and in one final act of covert rebellion, Eddie stuck his middle finger flat against the window of his mother’s station wagon and mouthed an acrimonious *Fuck. You.* that had been stuck under his tongue for so long it might as well have been a tattoo.

june tenth, 1994

“You have your inhaler? Right?” His mother asked, having decided that three minutes after he was meant to board the plane was the opportune time to lecture him. As she spoke, she jabbed an

accusatory finger at him as if he had ever forgotten it before. “Oh, and your pills! I told your father to make sure they still have your account on file there. You can’t forget to take them every morning, dear.” Her voice was stern, but she made sure to coat it with her *It’s because I love you* tone; the one that never failed to make his stomach churn. “*With* your breakfast, okay? If I find out that you’ve been skipping meals I’ll—oh, and the sun is harsher there during the summer, baby, so you better make sure you are putting sunscreen on every day, okay, sweetie?” Eddie winced—her public usage of a double pet name stung against his bright red cheeks. “Oh!—you brought your long underwear, yes?” She paused only to await his answer; apparently long underwear manifested the utmost precedence.

Before he could think up a response, he sucked in a deep breath to steel himself. *Jesus Christ*, her briefings were longer each year.

As there was no use in acknowledging any of her preexisting questions, Eddie smartly elected to answer her last one.

“It’s summer, Ma,” he finally said to her in an exasperated mutter.

Which he quickly realized was a mistake, as he watched his mother inhale sharply and fix him with The Look. The one where gravity yanked her eyebrows and the corners of her mouth into a downward slant; the face that said *I don’t like that tone* so that she didn’t actually have to. A face that made him flinch whenever graced with its presence. In an attempt to hide the grimace on his face, he looked to the scuffs on his shoes.

After a particularly contemplative pause, his mother reluctantly relented. When he glanced back up at her, he noticed that her shoulders had relaxed, the muscles in her cheeks had, too, and she even managed to put a smile on her pudgy face.

“Remember to call me as soon as you land,” her voice was taut with an emotion he knew all too well. “You know how anxious you flying makes me,” she reminded him, then, like she had to. Like he had ever forgotten to do a single thing she ever asked him.

Agitated, Eddie knew that, if he had had the time, he might have said

“Everything makes you anxious” or something equally as insensitive in response, just to aggravate her—but he had run out of time five minutes ago, and so he settled on saying only what she wanted to hear instead. A quick *Of course, Ma*, followed by an automatic *I love you*, that to the untrained ear sounded almost sincere. But it was never meant to fool them.

Rather abruptly, Sonia gathered Eddie into her arms and hugged him tight. Tight enough to make him wheeze in discomfort. So tight that he swore he could feel the circulation in his lungs cut off. Her grip loosened, but barely, so that she could pull back to see his face more clearly. Though he made sure to put distance between them, she saw it as no obstacle and reached for his face—as she always did—and held it securely with her sweaty palms pressed flush against his cheeks.

“Don’t forget to take your medicine, okay?” Behind her thick-rimmed glasses, her eyes filled with tears. He liked to think that this was her way of saying she was going to miss him. “Be good.”

Of course—how could he forget; her last command, watery but domineering as always. Amidst all of her rules, this was the most important. The one that stuck. And just like she intended, the only thing he could hear while he slipped out of her grasp; the one thought in his head as he finally walked across the boarding bridge, the single phrase engraved in his mind even after he found his seat and the plane took off.

A never-ending echo between his ears that reminded him that even 1200 miles away, he could never escape the laws and regulations of his mother.

“Be good,” she said to him. Every year. Every summer. For as long as he could remember, those had been her parting words. “Be good,” she told him, ordered him, because she knew he would listen. One single phrase that brought her comfort this time of year—the only time he was ever away from her; out of her direct line of vision. It drove her insane. He knew it did.

Perhaps that was why it was so exhilarating to get away; from her—from Derry. Why he deliberately reiterated to her how much he

enjoyed visiting his dad, how excited he was to go back, how it was the one thing he looked forward to each and every summer. Pointedly, he crossed out the days on the kitchen calendar until they finally approached the circled date simply to aggravate her—in case she ever dared to forget that his desire to leave would never cease to be.

By the time the plane landed, it was nearing eleven PM and Eddie had, at some point, allowed himself to doze off. Although, as the plane's tires collided with the concrete of the tarmac, he had been jostled awake rather abruptly. The elderly man beside him, however, slept through the entire thing, and Eddie had to be the one to wake him up with a polite tap to his shoulder and a practically shouted, "Sir, the plane landed!" because he hadn't budged when he said it at his normal volume.

Once off the plane, Eddie kept his promise and called his mother, who picked up after one ring. *Yes, I landed, Ma*, he said when she asked (irritably thinking *obviously*), *No, no one is following me (no one ever is), Dad's at baggage claim waiting for me (like he is every year.)* A spare glance to his watch told him that it was now eleven-fifteen, but midnight back in Derry. Especially late for her; she was rarely up past ten o'clock most nights.

God, how long had she been waiting for him? How long had she sat at the kitchen table—the chair closest to the phone but with the best view of the television)—expecting his call? Ears anticipating the shrill ring, hands wrung in her lap, foot tapping restlessly against the linoleum kitchen floor. The image of her was so vivid, it was as if he were standing there watching her. Like, simply by speaking to her on the phone, he had been yanked back to Maine by his heartstrings.

Their conversation, not at all to his surprise, remained identical to all of their over-the-telephone discussions in years prior. After they shared *I-love-you's*, she made sure to ask the last question she ever did: "You're *sure* your father is there?" because after twelve years she

still refused to believe his father a capable man. Before they hung up, he heard her sniffle predictably, and didn't feel an ounce of guilt when he rolled his eyes. Instead, he was irritated. After all these years, was her charade worth it? Did it make her feel better to trick herself into thinking that Eddie couldn't see through her facade? He supposed he had to commend her for her commitment; she was nothing if not dedicated to her craft.

Eventually, he made it downstairs in time to grab his bag. Baggage claim always made him anxious—a crowd of people, none of them willing to make room for the other, all trying to rip their suitcases from the conveyor belt before anyone could beat them to it. Except, he had sort of mastered it by then; he learned some years ago that so long as you know how to maneuver your shoulders, and don't make eye contact, you can get through pretty much unscathed.

Luckily, his suitcase was rounding the belt just as he approached the carousel and he retrieved it with ease. Then, he routinely scanned the crowd of people for a familiar 1987 World Series Minnesota Twins baseball cap. Of course, he found it where he always did; on the outskirts of the flock of people, arms folded patiently across his chest and an eager look on his face. When Eddie's eyes found him, his father turned, almost instinctively, in time for their gaze to meet right in the middle.

Frank Kaspbrak wasn't a tall man, only a few inches taller than Eddie himself, but his bright aura followed him wherever he went, attracting the light in every room he entered. Never without a smile or a kind thing to say, Eddie thought his father as one of the happiest people that he knew. Which was the very thing that nourished the hope that some day, he might be that happy, too.

"Hey! Kiddo!" His father called to him jovially, politely brushing past strangers awaiting their luggage so that he could get to Eddie with his arms spread wide. When he got close enough, he pulled Eddie into a bear hug and Eddie went willingly. Because his father's hugs were always warm, secure, and felt like *I missed you, welcome home*. Where his ma's were suffocating and smothering, a grip so tight that Eddie was never sure she planned on ever letting go.

Eddie didn't waste another second, wrapped his arms around his

father to hug him back. “Hi, Dad,” he all but beamed into the man’s shoulder. Even his exhaustion couldn’t deter the elation that filled him as they held onto each other in the middle of a bustling crowd. It had been so long since the last time he felt this way—safe and warm—that he never wanted to let go. That he would be perfectly happy if he got to spend the next few months in this embrace.

After a few more seconds, though, his father released him. Extended his arms so that he could get a better look at his son’s face. Between them, they shared a fond smile.

“Ready-Eddie?” Frank asked as he clapped Eddie on the shoulder affectionately, squeezed it a bit.

Smile still pulling at the corners of his mouth, Eddie nodded. He tugged his suitcase behind him as they started toward the exit while his father talked. Typically, after a long day, Eddie preferred silence—but he decided long ago that he was more than content to listen to anything his father had to say.

“So, since I know she’s waiting on the edge of her seat to know,” he began, “yes, I got your pills,” he started, chuckling lightly—God, Eddie had missed him. “This morning, actually. Oh!—and I painted your room green. Hope you won’t miss that yellow wallpaper too much, but it’s been up there since I bought the house, oh, however long ago that was,” he tapped his chin in consideration. Then, his eyebrows flew upward as he seemed to recall something important. “Also, Mrs. Tinny—you remember her?” Eddie nodded. “Well, she helped me fix up the garden, say, three months ago? Gotta say, she’s a beaut, Eddie Van*—the garden, not Mrs. Tinny.” A quick pause as he mulled this over, pulled his keys from his jeans pocket to unlock the car. “That’s not to say she isn’t beautiful herself, but she is nearing sixty these days. Would be the talk of the town if I had a thing for her!” He exclaimed with a hearty laugh.

All through his dad’s good-natured rambles, Eddie grinned wide and bright. Since he was a kid, he had loved listening to his father speak. Something about it made him feel peaceful and happy, no matter what the topic was. A run in with an old friend at the grocery store, some strange show he found himself watching one night—whatever it was, he was more than happy to hear it.

Throughout the entire year—from the day he came home to Derry until they were together again—Eddie was nothing if not eager to come back. Back to Chicago, back to his father—back *home*. Chicago lifted the ever-present weight off his shoulders; made it easier to breathe. And because he finally could: he breathed.

A deep, long and steady exhale through his nose. A sharp inhale that infiltrated his nose with the scent of the parking lot—asphalt and rubber and cigarette smoke. It filled his lungs, nearly intoxicating him. The air around him thick with humidity, but cool and refreshing as the wind kissed his warm cheeks.

Briefly, he let his eyes close as he allowed it to cover him like a blanket. God, he didn't think it was possible to miss a place so much—but he had and maybe it had something to do with the fact that after this summer he wasn't sure when he would be back—but whatever it was, it brought about a hollow ache in his chest and with one glance at his father he felt like he could burst into tears.

They spent the drive home discussing the usual: *How is your mother? Same as always. She sews now. You get assigned a dorm, yet? Won't know until the end of the month. Still like deep dish, right? Never gonna stop.*

The conversations were mostly trivial, but he didn't mind. Weekly phone calls throughout the year hardly allowed for simple talks like that. Eddie was more than happy to sit in the passenger seat of his father's car and listen as he tried to explain the difference between a chamomile and a daisy to him.

Somewhere between exiting the highway and driving down the dark and empty road home, he had succumbed to his exhaustion from traveling. So, by the time they pulled into the driveway, Eddie was fast asleep. But was nudged awake by his father, who laid a heavy hand on his shoulder, careful not to startle him.

“Wakey wakey Eds-n-bakey,” he whispered the same phrase he had since Eddie was five and fell asleep on the living room couch. If only he were still that small, so he could be carried to bed instead of having to walk there himself.

Groaning, Eddie rubbed his eyes with his knuckles and yawned.

His dad patted his shoulder, laughing lightly. “He awakens,” he joked in a deep voice as he cut the engine.

After popping the trunk, he got out to retrieve Eddie’s luggage before Eddie even had a chance to protest. He did, however, manage to get out in time to take the handle from his dad and lug it inside himself. To which his dad held his hands up in surrender, then said, in mock offense: “I forgot, you’re an adult, now” and in his half-awake state, Eddie offered a laugh as his response.

Since it was a little past midnight and Eddie could hardly fight to keep his eyes open, Frank decided that they could catch up properly over breakfast the next morning. As he stood in Eddie’s doorway, fingers worrying a loose string on the bill of his hat, he offered to make him his favorite: blueberry pancakes.

“I could make some bacon, too. You still like bacon right? I haven’t lost you to those leaf-eaters, have I?” He quipped, breezy smile on his face.

Crinkling his nose, Eddie unzipped his suitcase and pulled out his pajamas. “Vegetarians don’t just eat leaves, Dad,” he responded with an eye roll. “But yes, I still like bacon. I’m not a monster.”

An airy chuckle sounded from the doorway, where Eddie found his Dad watching him with a fond look on his face. His chest warmed. “Alright, alright, just gotta ask. I can’t keep up with all the trends you kids start these days—”

Eddie interrupted him with a snort. God—he sounded like one of those Sitcom Dads. “Are you reading a script?” he teased.

Petulantly folding his arms across his chest, Frank heaved a dramatic sigh. “That’s it. *You’re* making the bacon, now, kid.”

“You’re just saying that because you burn it every time,” Eddie pointed out, smirking.

But his father was already walking away. From down the hall, he called: “*You’re* making it!” leaving Eddie to laugh to himself in spite

of his remark.

When Eddie's eyes snapped open the next morning, he was greeted only by the white stucco ceiling above him. For a moment, he was disoriented—what had happened to the pale yellow popcorn texture of his bedroom? As his eyes slid around the rest of the room and studied its four green walls, the window above him where beams of light poked through the closed blinds, cradling the side of his face like a warm hand against his skin, his memories came back to him.

Popcorn replaced with stucco, blue replaced with green, banality replaced by comfortability—he was in Chicago, not Derry.

Blinking once, twice, then three times, he shut his eyes tight for a short second and exhaled noisily from his nose. Then, somewhat abruptly, he sat up and looked at his watch—it was just past ten. Shit, he thought, running a clammy hand down his tired face. Humidity clung to every pore, stuck to him like glue. Both the back of his neck and his forehead were sweating, prompting his legs to kick themselves free from the comforter. Clothes soaked through almost—gross—he needed a shower. A shower and a meal and fresh air, he remarked, standing from his bed.

As he stood, he extended his arms over his head and simultaneously ran through the developing To Do List in his head: call Mom, take shower, eat, brush teeth—and then, mid-stretch, his thoughts were intercepted by a sweet, unmistakeable scent.

Arms dropped to his sides, Eddie turned toward the vent in his bedroom and inhaled deeply in an attempt to identify the familiar fragrance. Immediately, he knew what he was smelling, and then, nothing else mattered.

Body moving of its own volition, he darted out of his bedroom, toward the smell of what could only be described as paradise and happiness and perfection all mixed into the shape of a circle to become one. Sliding into the kitchen, socks carrying him across the tiled entryway, he asked, “Blueberry pancakes?”, excitement raising

his voice an octave.

Looking up from the skillet, his father laughed when he saw Eddie. “Good mornin’ to you, too, kid,” he snorted. He was dressed in jeans and a simple t-shirt, but still in his loafers. The same ones he had worn since Eddie needed a step stool to reach the kitchen sink.

Sighing, Eddie leaned against the counter. “Good morning, Dad, thank you for making breakfast,” he recited monotonously, arms folded over his chest. But his exasperated stature didn’t last; all it took was a quirked brow from Frank to shatter his facade, make him laugh.

Flipping a pancake onto the ever-growing pile already on a plate, Frank made an uh-huh noise under his breath. “I think you mean ‘Thank us’ because you’ve got bacon to make,” he noted, pointing to a package on the counter next to Eddie, unfortunately reminding him of the duty bestowed upon him the night before.

And—once Eddie asked his father a million and one questions about how to cook the bacon, is this too hot? how much oil? are these ones done?—it wasn’t long before there was a smile on his face, their faces, as they cooked side by side and laughed and joked, enjoyed one another.

When the grease cracked and popped and Eddie squealed and jumped back, Frank’s “careful!” was not harsh or reprimanding but a genuine shout of worry, arm held out as a shield. When he burnt one slice to a crisp, they snickered and curated a rather creative obituary: “Here lies Pork Chop, who fried in a boar accident, found on the shore of Grease,” snorting at their terrible puns as they tossed it into the garbage bin.

Fifteen minutes later, the food was ready and Eddie was more or less salivating. Together, they brought everything to the dining room table; the pancakes and the bacon, the milk and the orange juice (for his father—he drank orange juice with everything—even chocolate cake), forks and knives and napkins. All of it just for the two of them. Which might have been too much if not for the fact that between Eddie and his dad, they could eat ten pancakes and about twenty pieces of bacon.

Really, if he could've, Eddie might've taken a picture. Everything looked perfect. And yeah, maybe it looked that way because it was his first homemade meal since his mom brought Easter leftovers home from church. But nonetheless, he wanted to remember this meal for the rest of his life.

Neither Eddie nor his father wasted any time stuffing their faces. Once both their pancakes and their bacon were sufficiently drenched with syrup, they dug in, scarfing their food down in record timing. A bystander might have thought this was their first meal ever, what with how quickly they ate and went back for more. In sync, they moved around one another; Frank went right as Eddie went left, vice versa.

In between bites, Frank seemed to remember that he had something to tell Eddie, holding up a finger that meant "I'm about to say something," and after he swallowed, said, "Bill called earlier, by the way," the way Eddie perked up almost instantly went unnoticed by Frank as he continued, "Gosh, his voice got deeper! Thought it was his father, at first. D'y'know the little one—George, er, Georgie—he's going into the sixth grade! Guess he isn't so little anymore, huh? Isn't that just bananas? Kid's gonna be twenty before we know it! I mean I remember when—"

"What did Bill say?" Eddie interrupted, not to be rude, but because he knew if he didn't, he might never get the chance to ask. His father had a tendency to give endless monologues—that most days, Eddie was more than willing to listen to—and it was hard to pull him out of it once he got himself started.

Frank seemed to remember that he had an initial point to make, and blinked. "Right," he chuckled, at himself most likely, then said, "Anyway, Billy wanted to know if you'd be home around seven."

Eddie's eyebrows disappeared beneath his hair—*too long, Eddie, let me cut it, it's curling over, don't you hate that?*—"Will I?"

Wiping his mouth with a napkin, his dad sat back in his chair with a shrug. "Well, shoot, I don't have anything planned except from the same old!" He replied. "I know you don't come here every year to sit watch Westerns with your old man, Eddie Van*. You've got places to

go, people to see. Long as you're home by midnight—unless you plan on staying over, that is?—” another shrug, “—you're welcome to go wherever you please.”

Immediately after he finished—and helped his father clean up the mess—Eddie rushed into the hall to call Bill. Fingers bustling, fumbling over the buttons as he punched in the number, flighty with an eagerness that animated his insides. Sure, he and Bill sent letters back and forth, averaging one every few weeks; the first week of school, baseball tryouts, when does track start?, Halloween plans?, what colleges they applied to—their topics ranged from things that mattered and things that didn't. They called every now and then, but *long distance calls are expensive*, Eddie, so they never lasted more than three minutes. Barely enough time to say *hey, how have you been? What's new?*

But now they didn't have to rely on pens and paper and postage stamps and crackly phones to communicate—Bill lived ten minutes away (on bike) and they had the entire summer ahead of them.

As the dial tone rang and rang, Eddie waited impatiently in the hall. The Denbrough's had two phones—one in the kitchen and one in the basement. The basement phone was practically Bill's, he might as well have lived down there. It was rare for him to not be down there, playing some video game or reading or whatever thing he had to occupy himself. The line rarely rang for more than thirty seconds, and soon Eddie's impatience was replaced by anxiety.

But, just as he was about to give up hope, the dial tone was interrupted by a click—someone had picked up.

Whoever answered, however, was certainly not Bill Denbrough.

“Den-blow residence, who's-a'callin'?” a vaguely familiar voice, tone mocking that of a disinterested receptionist. But Eddie couldn't put a face or a name to the person speaking—he knew Bill had friends, or, rather, knew Bill's friends—and it left him speechless.

Aside from the faint “um,” he managed to squeak into the receiver, he said nothing. For a moment, he contemplated hanging up and trying again later. Maybe this mystery person wouldn't be there in a

couple hours.

Before he could make a decision, Bill's voice cut through.

"Richie, hang up," he sighed, muffled laughter in the background.

"Who's Richie? This is Flo, honey. In HR?" the voice continued, this time in a pathetic New York Accent—HR came out like H-ahhh, making Eddie crinkle his nose in distaste. Of course—how could he forget... Richie Tozier, Bill's longtime friend and Eddie's longtime nuisance.

Well, to be fair, Eddie hardly knew the guy. They had met only a handful of times and only ever long enough to exchange names and niceties. Richie had a tendency to call Eddie everything but his name—Eds, Eddie Spaghetti, Edward, Eddison, Edmund—and was quite possibly the most flirtatious and shameless person he had ever been acquainted with. He was Too-Tall and Too-Loud—his rowdy, I-Don't-Give-A-Shit nature always rubbed Eddie the wrong way; made him uneasy.

Luckily for him, though, Richie worked at the water park during the summer, which meant he was hardly ever around and their interactions remained minimal. Which Eddie was grateful for, because any time Richie was around his insides seemed to freeze and his arms felt like lead and his tongue stopped working and all he could do was stand there, mute and paralyzed by intimidation, anxiety, too timid to function. No one ever seemed to notice—at least he hoped they never did—but still, it didn't matter. If Richie was in proximity, Eddie was as good as a statue.

None of Bill's other friends were as daunting as Richie—Ben was kind and soft spoken, Mike was patient and funny, Bev was fiery but she was warm, too, because of it (not to mention Eddie's favorite out of them all), and though Stan was blunt he was also compassionate—the few times they had met, anyway (because Stan worked with Richie at the park and rarely came by). Previous summers, any time they were around they made Eddie feel welcome. Ben talked to him about school and places he'd like to visit one day (Europe, Asia, Costa Rica...), Mike offered him rides and invited him anywhere they were going, Bev gave him extra pins and asked about his dad, about

him. Sometimes it felt as though they were as much his friends as they were Bill's, and maybe he let that go a little bit to his head.

A lengthy groan on the opposite end brought Eddie back to reality—Richie was, unsurprisingly, barking any time Bill tried to speak. With his free hand, Eddie pinched the bridge of his nose—had he been distracted for that long?

“C-Cut it out, will you?” Bill demanded, exhaling once more. “You still there Eddie?” he asked affably, trying to mask his irritation.

“Bark, ruff, yip—wait—Ready Spaghetti, is that you?”

“Uh—,” Eddie reluctantly opened his mouth to respond, but Bill's voice interrupted him.

“Bev,” he murmured away from the phone, “collect the village idiot, please?”

Richie scoffed. “Actually, I prefer Town Fool, but—” mid-sentence, the sound cut out abruptly and the unmistakable click of the line cutting out followed. Bev was, evidently, successful in her mission to retrieve Richie.

“Okay, suh-sorry about that,” Bill sighed, “but hey! You're home! Which I know because I called this morning!” He crowed with a laugh.

Wave of relief washing over him—now that it was just the two of them—Eddie laughed, too. “Yeah, sorry I missed it. I overslept,” he admitted.

“Figures,” came Bill's reply. “Your dad said you didn't get home till midnight. How's your mom?”

At the mention of his mother, Eddie's face fell. He'd forgotten to call her. *Shit.* “She's fine,” he answered stiffly. Bill knew better than anyone how Eddie felt about his mother. “How's Georgie?” he asked, wanting to change the subject.

“Huge pain in my ass. He keeps asking about you; we got the new Atari and he keeps challenging everyone to try and beat him,” he

grumbled irritably, and Eddie couldn't help but laugh.

"Has anyone?"

"Yeah, Richie's creamed him about a hundred times. Which is why he is so determined to beat everyone else. It's annoying," a quick pause followed by some rustling—Bill hadn't stopped moving since they'd been on the phone. "Don't worry, though, he isn't here so you're safe. Mom and Dad took him to Grandma's 'cause they're in Wisconsin till Sunday. And I'm having a party," he admitted the last bit sheepishly, as if he were ashamed of himself for fulfilling the ultimate teenage cliche.

That Eddie had no choice but to snicker at. "So you're a douchebag, now, huh?"

"Apparently. You in?"

Rolling his eyes, Eddie breathed a sarcastic, "obviously," into the phone, despite the fact that the thought of a party made his stomach churn.

"Yes!" Bill hollered. "It's gonna be great—and don't be nervous, they're just a bunch of theater nerds. Nothing to be worried about," he reassured him, aware of Eddie's anxieties.

"I'm not nervous," Eddie bit back defensively. Then, in a calmer voice, said, "I'll be there at seven."

"Then it's a date," a new voice responded dreamily, making Eddie's cheeks burn hotter than the sun. "See you, then, Eds!"

Inside, his intestines molted together to become one. Even if he had a smart ass thing to say in reply, he wouldn't have been able to. His tongue was apparently glued to the back of his teeth; he was rendered speechless.

"Richie, hang up the fuh-fucking phone!"

Notes for the Chapter:

please bare with me...

i know this chapter was monstrous. i tend to wax poetic (eddie allows for a lot of that) but i promise chapter two is far more action than it is inner monologues!

as always, let me know what u thought! comments and kudos are very much appreciated! <3333
thank u. until next time.

* in case anyone was confused about the origin of eddie van, frank is a van halen fan and eddie van halen is the lead guitarist. the rest is history

2. chivalry is dead

Summary for the Chapter:

“Five minutes late to our first date,” and Eddie didn’t have to turn to see the smirk on his face. “Chivalry truly is dead,” he continued in a woeful tone, grabbing the attention of the others, now.

“Knock it off, Rich,” Mike laughed, shaking his head in spite of him.

“How can I?” He scoffed, standing beside Eddie now. “When he hurt me so... Eddie, my love—”

“Rich—” Bill interjected, reaching over to yank a piece of his hair but Richie dodged him skillfully.

And Eddie refused to look anywhere but at the vase on the table in the hallway, dodging Richie skillfully.

Notes for the Chapter:

hi all! i have two playlists for this fic, if any of u were interested. [side a](#) is a collection of mostly 80s songs that i imagine eddie, in this work specifically, listens to pretty much on repeat the entire summer, and [side b](#) is a bit dreamier, mostly 50s songs but very much representative of richie and eddie's relationship in the up and coming chapters.

enjoy! ♥

june eleventh, 1994

Seven o’clock came sooner than Eddie wanted it to.

When he glanced down at his watch to check the time, he was met by a blocky 6:30 on its face that stood out emboldened as if to mock him. It plunged his stomach through the couch and to the floor, shot him up from the couch and out of the living room in a split second;

his dad calling after him: “Was it something I said?”

He didn’t have time to entertain his joke—somehow he had let the whole day pass him by, and perhaps it was on purpose, or on accident—accidentally on purpose—since he had been consciously worrying about Bill’s party—the one he didn’t *have* to worry about (but would and did because it was in Eddie’s nature to worry about everything) from the moment he put the phone back on the receiver.

Brain stock full of underage drinking statistics—*5,000 people under age 21 die from alcohol-related injuries involving underage drinking every year*—he was desperate for a distraction, and after breakfast asked his dad if he wanted to watch his collection (that he referred to as impressive and superb) of John Wayne movies—“If everything isn’t black and white, I say, ‘Why the hell not?’”—and they spent the entire day on the couch, watching the movies his mother could never stand to watch. Eddie with his knees to his chest and toes dipped between the cushions, Frank with his slippered feet propped up on the ottoman, coffee in hand, they started with their favorite, *The Cowboys*, and were in the middle of True Grit and a freshly popped bowl of popcorn when Eddie noticed the time.

In his bedroom, he spent too much time picking out an outfit, worked too hard to silence the words that had been poking and prodding at him since he heard them. *Then it’s a date!*—Richie’s words; Richie’s remark; teasing, as always. Just a joke. Richie had said it and he hadn’t meant it because he rarely ever meant anything he said. Eddie at least knew enough about him to know that, but still, he let the words drape themselves around his shoulders, the ghost of an arm that always seemed to find him and pull him in close whenever he was within reach, and it gnawed at him. Yanked the collar of his shirt and the hair at the nape of his neck and his tongue in his throat.

For most of the day, he had been able to quiet the words to a hush, but as he darted around his room, trying desperately to find something to wear that felt right and comfortable, they were screaming, seeping into the grooves of his brain to make a home there. But he was determined to pretend they weren’t, that they hadn’t, and preoccupied himself with picking between looking casual or nice or like he didn’t care, and by the time he decided, it was nearing seven o’clock and he hadn’t even gotten to his hair yet.

Glancing between his watch and his mirror, he elected not to care about whether or not his hair was fixed, grabbed the overnight bag he had packed as a precaution and forced his legs to carry him to the front door.

On the couch, his father spared him a glance, a hint of a smile on his face. “Headin’ out?” He asked, trying and failing to sound relaxed and uninterested, The Aloof Parent.

“Uh huh,” Eddie breathed, slipping on his shoes from the hall. “Gonna stay over. I’ll be back tomorrow. That alright?”

Nodding, his dad turned to look at him, full smile lighting up his features. “Course, bug. I’ve got a plans, anyway,” he sat forward and plucked a VHS tape from the ottoman—*When Harry Met Sally*—to show it to Eddie. “Meg Ryan and I have date.”

Now at the door, Eddie snorted. “You don’t mind sharing with Harry?”

“I’m a patient man, son,” he said matter of factly. “Go on and get. Be safe and call me if you need me, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Eddie agreed, stepping through the doorway then, calling out “love you!” as he walked out onto the porch.

Before he closed the door, his dad shouted a “Love you, too!” in response, and then, Eddie was out of the house, opening the garage to retrieve his bike, and with flushed cheeks and a stuttering pulse, rode to Bill’s (*Then it’s a date!* tagging along for the ride.)

Eddie wanted to be mad—and he would have been if he weren’t so occupied with being so nervous he could puke—because this summer was meant to be the one that broke the cycle, stopped the wheel, cut the ties bound to his heartstrings. For too long he had let too many things control him, whether it be his mother or Derry or his own thoughts and fears, and just for once, he wanted to be the one holding the reigns.

Tonight was going to be that.

It had to be—he would be relenting; no matter what hand this night

dealt him, he would adhere to that conclusion, and he wouldn't let anything deter him from doing so.

(Not even Richie Tozier and his stupid, meaningless words or his incessant need to be a pest. Especially not him.)

By the time Eddie rounded Elm street—Bill's block—he felt better, maybe even felt good. Excited. Ready. For what, he wasn't entirely sure; this was his first party since the third grade (information he would definitely keep confidential if the question presented itself). Whatever. He didn't care.

He didn't care and he wouldn't—his second proclamation for the night.

I don't care he thought as he approached Bill's house, on the corner, the nicest one—a pale blue paneled house with a wrap around porch and arched windows with white windowsills and Mrs. Denbrough's colorful garden out front, perched on top of the hill, open grass field stretching behind it, a playground off to the right, the hiking trail Eddie and Bill used to race their bikes down wrapping around it and fading behind the trees—and counted five cars parked on the side.

I don't care he repeated as he tossed his bike into the grass, *I don't care* he promised as he adjusted the straps on his backpack and smoothed out his shirt, *I don't care* he swore as he stepped up to the porch, where voices and laughter and music filtered through the door, knocking on it, echoing mantra in his head, *I don't care I don't care I don't care*.

Not a second later, it opened, and on the other side, a girl he didn't recognize. Tall, long blonde hair, a Bart Simpson t-shirt tucked into a pair of jeans with a hole in the knee, a kind smile on her face despite looking like everyone he sought to avoid all through high school.

As he opened his mouth to greet her, a voice cut through—"Who's at the door, Daph?"—a voice he recognized.

Then, appearing next to the girl, the owner of the voice; Bill, who looked taller, older but younger somehow, hair swept to the side with a wave, in a shirt Eddie didn't recognize, bright eyes and an even

brighter smiler than he did. *Still Bill*, Edide thought with relief, because a lot could change in eight months (and Eddie was more scared of that than anything else—change), but Eddie was still Eddie and Bill was still Bill and they were the same, the only differences external but those weren’t the ones that mattered. And knowing that reassured him, but not as much as Bill barging onto the porch and crushing Eddie against his chest with his arms wound tightly around his midsection did. A loud but unspoken *I missed you* that Eddie returned without a thought, crushing Bill right back.

In the doorway, the girl watched them with a fond expression momentarily before she turned and walked back into the living room, leaving them to it.

After a beat, they pulled back, but Bill kept Eddie at arms length, hands still on his shoulders. “You look taller,” Bill grinned. “Been eating your Wheaties, huh, kid?” Ruffling Eddie’s hair, he laughed when Eddie swatted his hand away.

“Fuck off,” he snapped, knowing that the fond look on his face took away the heat of his remark. “I’m still older than you,” he commented with a discerning glare.

Laughing again, Bill wrapped an arm around Eddie and guided him inside (and Eddie ignored the way his intestines twisted around one another like vines when he saw just how many people were inside, too), gave his arm a reassuring squeeze that helped only a little bit. Then, without warning, shouted, “look who showed up!” to the room full of people, who had been engaged in what Eddie assumed was a drinking game of some sort.

At the sound of Bill’s voice, though, they dropped what they were doing and turned, faces Eddie didn’t recognize and ones that he did; Bev and Ben were the first to turn, faces splitting into identical grins when their eyes found Eddie. And Mike, in the corner, held a cup up as he cheered his salute, a few others joining him good-naturedly. The weight of that many eyes on him felt a little unbearable—memories of walking to Mr. Keene’s pharmacy in the afternoon, head down, because everyone had heard what happened, everyone knew—but he shook it off, took them as graciously as he could: a thin-lipped smile and a curt little wave.

(He duly noted that Richie was nowhere to be found, and duly disregarded the weird dip in his stomach)

Most of the room returned their attention to their game and their conversations, but Mike, Ben, and Bev were on Eddie like white on rice. Before he knew it, he was being enveloped into yet another hug, this time four pairs of arms circled around him and had they belonged to anyone else he might've felt like he was suffocating, but breathing had never been easier.

When they pulled back, they were all smiles—Eddie, included—and a whirlwind of questions and comments crowded their space; Bev wanted to know where he got his shirt, Ben asked how he had been and Mike was curious about NYU, and he tried his best to keep up, to answer all their questions, because he had missed them and missed talking to them and missed having something to talk about. For a while, he forgot there was even anyone else there with them, that they were at a party, that he had been so nervous to even come. Forgot Richie's words and how they had made him fidget, his voice and how it made him feel, up until it was right behind him, speaking to him, saying,

"Five minutes late to our first date," and Eddie didn't have to turn to see the smirk on his face. "Chivalry truly is dead," he continued in a woeful tone, grabbing the attention of the others, now.

"Knock it off, Rich," Mike laughed, shaking his head in spite of him.

"How can I?" He scoffed, standing beside Eddie now. "When he hurt me so... Eddie, my love—"

"Rich—" Bill interjected, reaching over to yank a piece of his hair, but Richie dodged him skillfully.

And Eddie refused to look anywhere but at the vase on the table in the hallway, dodging *Richie* skillfully.

But that didn't deter him—Eddie didn't think it would, anyway. "I have never felt such sorrow—heartbreak consumes me, it becometh me," he was crooning now, mocking some kind of Shakespearean accent, sounding an awful lot like a low budget, small-town

production Romeo. But he dropped it in an instant, switched back to his actual voice so quickly it gave Eddie whiplash.

“How’s it hanging, Eds?” He greeted, lifting his eyebrows once, twice, the smile on his face akin to a little kid eyeing a big stuffed animal at the carnival.

Still struggling to get ahold of his bearings, Eddie’s tongue slipped around a clumsy, mumbled, “It’s hanging” that got a laugh out of Richie and Bev, who laughed so similarly the sound blended together to create a single harmony. Something about it made his stomach squirm.

Only then did Eddie let himself look at Richie—still consumed by some outrageously irrational fear that if he did look he would freeze or turn to stone—and when he did, the world didn’t stop like he thought it might (rather, unbeknownst to him, it flipped on its axis, turned everything on its side but Eddie, who stood upright amidst a sideways world), but the pull on his stomach was still there, as it always had been. It was something he had learned to live with the second he realized Richie wasn’t going anywhere—big smile around two big teeth with a gap between them, bug eyed and open faced, *“you’re gonna need this, matey!”*, plopping a plastic pirate hat onto his head—years ago when Eddie was more afraid of getting the flu than he was anything else.

(Before he met Richie.)

He couldn’t remember the last time they had seen each other. Not in passing, but really, actually; the last time they had had a conversation that wasn’t just Richie calling him some nickname and Eddie either ignoring him or correcting him. A long time ago, he knew. It was a long time ago.

When he looked at Richie, now, he couldn’t quite believe that he was that same Richie from back then, the one he knew. The Richie with blush red cheeks and too-big eyes and a too-big smile and a too-big presence that made Eddie want to stick his head in the ground. But at second glance, not much had really changed about him, he thought resolutely. Sure, he was taller. Sure, his round cheeks had hollowed out and made room for prominent cheekbones and a sharper jaw.

Sure, his smile was straight when it had been crooked for so long; but the child was still very much there. In the bright of his eyes, the lightness of his laugh, the quirk of his smile, lopsided and puppy-like. If he stared long enough, and really, truly concentrated, he knew he would be able to see him; the Richie Tozier that scared him but not because he was... whatever he was now, but because he was funny and unashamed and *happy*. The Richie Tozier he knew.

Suddenly consciously aware that he had been staring, Eddie turned his gaze to Bev, who met him halfway. Feeling caught, his cheeks burned white hot, but if she suspected anything, she didn't show it. Instead, she sent him a smile, and then she reached forward and looped her arm through his, pulling him away from the group.

“Get a drink with me?” she posed it like a question, but he didn't think he had much of a choice. So he nodded, and let her steer him into the kitchen; away from the party and away from their friends (*away from Richie*).

Once in the kitchen, she slid her arm out of his and went straight to the counter, which was a mess of bottles he knew without actually knowing were full of alcohol, red solo cups, empty and full, as well as bottles of Sprite and Coke and an abandoned box of pizza on the side. From the untouched stack on the other end, Bev pulled two cups and set them down.

“What's your poison?” She asked, and Eddie wanted to tell her he had no idea; he had never had a drink before and the movies never did tell the audience what they were actually drinking, but he knew how lame that would sound if he did.

With a shrug, he told her to pick. She smiled and grabbed the bottle of sprite and one of the several unidentifiable bottles beside it. Working quickly, she poured some Sprite and some alcohol into both cups, and when she was satisfied with the amount she opened the freezer and came back out with two handfuls of ice that she plopped into their cups.

“If you hate it,” she said as she offered him his, “you don't have to drink it. And don't feel bad if you do,” she put the brim of her cup against his and then put it to her lips, tossed her head back, and took

a huge gulp.

Blinking at her, Eddie stood there motionless for a second too long, before he kicked himself into gear and mimicked her actions. Which was a mistake, because he spilled more than half of his drink on himself, and had a much harder time swallowing it than she had seemed to. “God,” he repulsed after he got it down, “what is this?” He asked, scrunching up his face.

Giggling into her palm, Bev reached over and dangled the bottle between two fingers. “Vodka soda, babe,” she told him, smirk on her face, “better known as nail polish remover. Tastes amazing, huh?”

Eddie wasted no time shaking his head.

“It gets better,” she assured, “but if you absolutely hate it you can just leave it in here. Someone else will drink it.”

Again, Eddie shook his head. “No, no,” he looked at her, “I’m gonna finish it.”

For a second, she just looked right back at him, slowly raising her eyebrows. “Cool.” She dropped them with a smile. “I’m happy you’re home.”

At that, Eddie’s entire body warmed. The sensation pushed a small, private smile onto his lips. “Me too,” he told her earnestly, and she pulled him into a halfway hug; her arm wrapped around him, pulling him into her side, grip tight but gentle.

“You’re staying for good this time, right?” She asked as she pressed her temple against his, thumb soothing circles on his arm.

And God, if they were anywhere else but here, he probably would’ve cried. His eyes would have filled with tears and blurred his vision so bad that all he’d be able to see were balls of color; but they weren’t anywhere else, so his eyes stayed dry, and despite fearing it, guilt did not come crashing down on him as he told her, completely honest, “yeah. Yeah, I’m staying,” and it felt good to know that he was telling the truth.

For a little while, they stayed like that; standing in the kitchen, Bev’s

arm around him and their heads together, and the silence was nice, but Bev broke it after a moment or two. She wanted to know everything, so they talked about *almost* everything—from their favorite songs to what they were most looking forward to in college; Bev was going to Illinois State in the fall.

“Somehow I tricked them into accepting me,” she laughed, and Eddie had frowned, told her they would’ve been stupid not to. To which she responded to by linking her pinky with his, pulled his hand into hers to give it a squeeze that he returned.

“How’re things back in Derry?” Bev asked after another moment of shared silence, and when Eddie looked at her he could see the wary look in her eyes; she didn’t know if it was her place or not. But he figured, knowing what he did about her, and in return, the things he had revealed to her over time, that it was more her place to ask than anyone else’s—she perhaps understood it better than anyone else could.

But Eddie didn’t particularly feel like dampening the mood with that conversation—not tonight, anyway. So, he shrugged. “The same,” he told her honestly, and she took it with an easy nod, didn’t press any further than that.

Desperate to change the subject, Eddie opened his mouth to do just that but was interrupted by the sound of someone walking into the kitchen, and with one look to Bev, they both consciously decided they no longer needed to be in there and left the way they came; arm in arm.

When they came back into the living room, it definitely seemed that there were more people in there than before. Anxious, Eddie clutched his cup with white knuckles, and took one large gulp to distract himself from the feeling. Let Bev drag him over to the couch, where they plopped down between Bill and yet another girl Eddie didn’t recognize.

(and again, he was acutely aware of Richie’s missing aura; wondered where he kept running off to, only to instantly reprimand himself for caring at all)

He tried not to focus on the amount of people in the room or the volume of the music, and instead tried to find the comfort of being next to Bill, being there at all. He was safe. He was alright. There were no eyes on him; no one was watching. No one here knew, they couldn't, that was impossible—*they won't know just by looking at me.*

Clumsily he lifted the cup to his lips once again, taking another big sip but swallowing it down much easier now that his tongue had started to go numb.

To his left, Bill was watching him with a smirk. Eddie met him with a glare. “What?” he grumbled defensively, making Bill laugh.

“Just glad you’re here” he said smiling warmly. He threw a loose arm around Eddie’s shoulder, and leaned forward, pulling Eddie with him. “Hey, Amarie,” he called out, interrupting the girl’s conversation with Bev, “have you m-met Eddie, yet?”

Eddie’s gaze met Amarie’s—he knew without a doubt that she was Bill’s type in every way—and he greeted her with a small smile and a tiny wave. Discreetly, he darted his eyes between her and back to Bill, sending him a secret knowing look, before giving Amarie his full attention once again.

She was pretty—dark hair, light eyes, kind face, band tee underneath overalls, wrists decorated with thread bracelets, a bright smile that Eddie had a feeling was never not on her face.

Yeah, he thought amusedly, definitely Bill’s type.

“No, but I’m meeting him now!” She cheered, pushing her hand out for Eddie to shake. “I’m Amarie—duh. It’s nice to finally meet you, Eddie,” she said, smiling wider when Eddie took her hand and repeated her pleasantries. “Before I saw pictures of you, I thought Bill was making you up,” she joked with a tiny giggle that Eddie knew was certainly not meant for him.

Between them, Bev spared him a glance. Unable to catch himself, he snorted.

It was maybe easier than it should’ve been for Eddie to meld into

their conversation. He wasn't sure if it was the fact that he wasn't alone, that he had both Bill and Bev on his side, or if it was the alcohol—that he eventually finished at some point and was brought another one by Mike—but he supposed he didn't care why it was. It felt good to feel okay, to not worry over every word he said or movement he made. To not have to look over his shoulder, sit or act the right way. He felt... free. In a way. And he loved it.

Time passed, or maybe it didn't, but one second Eddie was squished on a couch meant for two but holding four, and the next he was dancing in the middle of the room, letting Bev and then Mike twirl him around. Laughing so hard at Ben's attempts at the Tootsee Roll that he snorted, struggling to breathe when Mike and a few others stepped in to show him how, and then he was sitting on the floor, holding his stomach, having so much fun he thought—for a moment—that maybe he was dead and in Heaven and none of it was real.

At that point, Eddie knew he was drunk, despite never experiencing the sensation until that night. But he was never so carefree, never so easily entertained, never so relaxed—and the voice in his head had never been so quiet. Although, he wasn't entirely sure as to how it had happened, and so quickly (was it quick?). Figured it probably had something to do with the phenomenon that was his seemingly bottomless cup. Whenever his drink emptied he was given another one—or rather, he requested one and then was.

After downing his fourth cup, Bill reached over and swiped the cup away, demanding through a hiccup and a few stutters that Eddie should cut himself off.

"We're out of alcohol, anyway, Billiam," Bev slurred from where she sat next to Eddie on the ground; she was braiding his hair and humming along to the radio—*I've never felt so satisfied, I'm in love, I'm alive*—as she tried and failed to thread strands of his hair together.

This information elicited several gasps from the room full of intoxicated teenagers that lead to a chorus of boos.

“Your parents got any booze lying around?” Someone asked amidst the grumbles and mumbled complaints.

Slow to respond, Bill scanned the room to see who it was that had asked, but his lack of efficiency only gave them the time they needed to decide to search for said secret stash.

Without waiting for an answer, a small group of clearly incoherent teenagers stumbled out of the room.

“Oh, Jesus Ch-Christ,” Bill huffed and pushed himself away from the wall, scrambling after the group with Ben in tow.

Still on the floor, Eddie and Bev exchanged glances with Mike, who sat with his legs criss-cross beside them, and erupted into fits of hiccuping laughter.

When they calmed down, Mike scooted closer to Bev, peering over her shoulder to watch her fingers as they wove strands of Eddie’s hair together. It was long enough for maybe two full plaits but no more than that, but Bev didn’t seem to care. As soon as she ran out of room, she dropped it and moved to a new section. Normally, Eddie hated when people fussed with his hair—his mother in particular, who always had something to say when it got this long. But he thought he could die happily like this—Bev’s careful fingers carding through his hair, gentle against his scalp. He could feel his eyes start to droop as he relaxed into her touch.

“You ever gonna show me how to do that?” Mike asked, gesturing to her handiwork.

Grinning, Bev shrugged her shoulders. “Depends. You ever gonna let me drive your truck?”

Mike gave an immediate “No.”

Bev frowned. “Then no deal. I get to drive Marty or you live a boring, braid-less life.”

Choking back a scoff, Mike shook his head, fond smile on his face. “Are you blackmailing me?”

With a snicker, Bev opened her mouth to respond, but was interrupted by another voice cutting through—“Blackmail? Count me in”—and instantly they lifted their heads to find Stan; sunburnt but barely, sporting a bright yellow tee with the letters TSWP printed above a colorful assortment of water slides and a large pool and a smirk, eyebrows raised with intrigue.

Mike was the first to stand up, calling out a happy “Hey! Stan the Man!” as he clapped him on the shoulder, pulled him into a half-hug.

Bev and Eddie, who were considerably drunker than Mike (and Eddie *still* wasn’t sure how he let it happen) had a harder time getting to their feet; Bev pulled herself off the floor first, but had to use Mike’s arm for support. When she was up she tried to take Eddie with her, but his dead weight was too much for her and they both stumbled against one another, shoulders shaking with laughter.

In the end, it was Mike who successfully got them off the ground and onto their feet.

Beside him, Stan watched the entire thing with a mixture of bewilderment and amusement on his face. He waited until they were stable to say anything.

“Eddie is here for one day and you guys already got him trashed?” He said with a sigh, and for a split second Eddie was embarrassed; he didn’t want Stan to be disappointed in him. It felt too much like disappointing Bill or his Dad. But Stan followed it up with a grin, and it wiped away any trace of regret. “How are you feeling, Eddie?” He called over the music.

A grin split Eddie’s face wide open as he leant his head on Bev’s shoulder. “Good. I can’t feel my lips. Bev braided my hair,” he said, pointing to both his mouth and his hair simultaneously. Stan wasn’t sure which finger to follow.

“Glad to hear it,” he nodded, then surveyed the room. “Where’s everyone else?” He asked them, eyebrows pulled together.

Hands in Eddie’s hair again—this time just playing with it lightly, petting the top of his head soothingly—Bev hiccuped instead of

replying. After giggling, she pointed to the hallway.

“Ben and Bill are playing bad-cop-good-cop. And I dunno what happened to Richie,” she said with a frown, and Eddie and Mike mimicked her; as if they had all just remembered that he was missing.

Stan sighed and rolled his eyes—he didn’t seem so surprised. “Does anyone?”

After mulling it over for a second, Mike and Bev nodded agreeably.

In his head, Eddie wondered what it meant. He had never been to a party with Richie before, so it made sense that he didn’t know. But he found that not knowing bothered him. More than it should have.

He didn’t have to ask, though, because Stan caught the look on his face (that he had no idea he was making in the first place.) “Richie is a clinger. If he makes someone laugh, he sticks to them all night,” he explained. “Wonder who the victim is tonight...”

Mike laughed. “I’m surprised it wasn’t you, Eddie. He loves torturing you,” he said, and Eddie would deny the way he blushed until the day he died.

“Yeah, be glad it’s only for three months. He tortures me year round,” Stan said, eliciting hearty laughs from both Bev and Mike.

“You love it,” Bev said, reaching over to pat Stan on the cheek affectionately.

Scrunching his face up around a smile, Stan kept her hand on his face for a moment, patting it gently. “He doesn’t have to know that,” he replied.

Just then, Ben and Bill emerged from the hallway—Bill in the midst of a heated argument with some guy Eddie did not remember the name of while Ben simply shook his head, rubbing his temples. Despite their distressed statures, it appeared the group hadn’t been successful in their quest to find any hidden alcohol.

“Wh-who’s idea was it to l-let m-m-m—fuck,” Bill swore as he

approached their group. He ran his hands down his face, let out an exasperated groan. “Who let me th-throw th-th-*this fucking party*,” he rushed out in one breath, obviously flustered. Then, absent-mindedly, said, “Hey Stan,” through a sigh.

With a snort, Stan gave his back a sympathetic pat.

Upon noticing who it was that was touching him, Bill brightened; officially acknowledging Stan’s presence.

“Hey, y-y-you made it!” He cheered, pulling Stan into a hug that he pretended not to want. Reaching out, Bill grabbed ahold of Eddie’s shirt and tugged him into his other side, gathering him into yet another hug. But Eddie went willingly (he would’ve sober).

Then, Bev, Ben and Mike were there, enveloping the other three into a tangled mess of limbs, and Eddie half expected to have a panic attack from being smothered, but instead reveled in the warmth of being drunk and being surrounded by the only people he would ever willingly let crush him like this.

They didn’t break away until behind them, someone shouted, “let’s play a game!” and when they turned to see who suggested it, they were met by the twinkling eyes of Amarie—who, unsurprisingly, only had eyes for Bill.

Everyone in the room seemed to perk up at the suggestion, and the barely sober part of Eddie knew that playing a drinking game should have screamed **DANGER** and put **DO NOT ENTER** warning signs in his mind to stop his heart in his chest.

Drunk Eddie, however, didn’t much care for warning signs or anything else that would stand in the way of having fun. His intoxicated conscience had a much easier time telling them to shut up and leave him alone, and it was freeing, he sighed inwardly—it felt good to be free.

Using a voice that was his but not quite his either, he agreed, and then everyone was arranged into a circle—a pattern of girl, boy, girl—and he stood between Bev and the girl who had greeted him earlier—Daphne—his heart a caged bird in his chest, veins alive and

pumping with adrenaline. But the sensation wasn't paralyzing, didn't scream *don't do this, get out!* at him relentlessly; it only made him jittery with a kind of excitement he wasn't sure he had ever felt before.

The game—as he learned—was called Suck and Blow, and the premise was simple. Place a card between someone and the person next to them, the first person sucked in air to keep the card pressed to their mouth, and then blew as they transferred it to the next player, who would then suck in to retrieve it, rinse, repeat. It was meant to be played with alcohol—if the players dropped the card they had to take a drink as punishment. Since they had depleted the necessary source, decided that whoever dropped the card had to participate in a dare of the crowd's choosing.

In truth, that made Eddie's ribcage swell and shrink as his heart pulsed erratically against it. He hadn't played Truth or Dare since he was young, and back then it hadn't been so scary. But he knew how potentially cruel and mischievous it could get. Perhaps naively, he hoped that this particular game wouldn't lead to that. Especially since it was dare only; it wasn't as if anyone was going to ask him to reveal anything about himself. Then again, it depended on the dare itself...he only hoped they stuck to the typical ones—lick the carpet, eat a weird assortment of foods, ding dong ditch someone...

Surprisingly, that scared him more than the actual premise of the game. Which, at its very core, was to put his mouth a millimeter away from someone else's—a *girl's*—with only a plastic card keeping them apart. But he was drunk, he was having fun, he didn't care about the intimate position the game would put him in, he didn't care about the possible germs it might spread. All he cared about was that he was *drunk* and that he was *having fun* and nothing else mattered because he was in control.

The game began once everyone finally understood. Wholly engaged, he watched as the first pair successfully switched the cards between them, anxiously anticipating his turn. Which came around sooner than he thought, and then Bev was leaning toward him, fighting back a smile but making eyes at him dramatically. He tried to choke down his sporadic giggles, and leant forward to meet her halfway.

In his drunken state, he inhaled far harder than he really had to, but it did the trick, and continuing to bite back his laughter, he turned and delivered the card to Daphne, a wild heart in his chest, the drowning words of his mother—*the human mouth carries 500 to 1000 different bacterias, did you know you can contract an STD from kissing someone with one? Like Herpes and even HPV and*—as she bent forward and put her mouth to the other side, pulling away successfully with a muffled cheer.

Maybe it was the joint level of intoxication in the room, but everyone was having fun; even the people who dropped the card and had to participate in a dare. The first to fail were Bill and Amarie, who had to switch socks and wear them for the rest of the game. Another couple had to attempt to do handstands for a minute. And then it was Eddie's turn again, Bev coming at him with a shimmy and him holding back a snort, repeating the same motions before. The beat of his heart evened out and by his second turn, he couldn't hear his mother's voice anymore, only the sounds of the laughter and cheers of encouragement in the room.

(He still couldn't quite believe that this night was happening; that he was there and that the entire thing was tangible—a terrible part of him could only wonder when it would come to an end)

Five rounds and four dares later, it was Eddie's turn yet again. At this point, he considered himself a pro. Even though his buzz was wearing off, even though his palms were sweating, even though he closed his eyes every time he had to blow the card onto Daphne's mouth. It didn't matter; his competitiveness fueled his urge to win, was far too overpowering to entertain his other thoughts.

He hadn't dropped the card once; he had no reason to think this would be the turn he finally did.

But as luck would have it, it was—he and Daphne watched it flutter to the ground, dumbstruck because they hadn't lost before. The rest of the circle booed, but he paid them no mind, too caught up in wondering what their punishment would be. Digging his nails into his palms, he met Daphne's eyes and winced. He could only hope they got a stupid one; like switching outfits or eating the oldest thing in Bill's fridge.

Then, amidst the shouts of dare suggestions, he heard it—the one thing he had entertained in only the worst of scenarios, the one thing he prayed they wouldn't say: "Kiss!"

Really, it shouldn't have been a big deal. They didn't say make out—just a peck on the lips, that was all. But it didn't matter—not Eddie. They might as well have. How ironic that Eddie had never kissed anyone, and now here he was living through every cliche and then some. What certainly didn't help was that even the mere thought of kissing anyone... kissing a *girl*... pushed his heart through his ribs, flattened it against the layer of muscle beneath his skin.

"Pick something else," Bill tried, rolling his eyes, "we aren't in middle school." He said, catching Eddie's eyes from across the circle.

"I don't mind," Daphne said quickly, looking to Eddie with a shrug.

Eyes blowing wide, Eddie darted his gaze over to her, hoping he didn't look nearly as terrified as he felt. "Uh," he blurted, the sound of everyone in the room cheering them on and shouting words of encouragement drowning out the squeak of his voice.

Behind him, Bev grabbed his elbow. "You don't have to if you don't want to, Eddie," she told him, "we can pick something else."

He desperately wanted to agree with her. Wanted more than anything to say, yes, tell them to pick something else—*anything* else—because his stomach was clenched like a fist and he could feel his pulse all the way down to his toes. It wasn't that Daphne wasn't—it wasn't that he didn't want to, but it was; he didn't want to kiss her—but not because of her or even the people egging it on; he was terrified of what would come after for reasons he would rather never have to list nor explain.

As he looked around the room, at Bill's drawn in eyebrows, Stan's visible wince and Mike's hesitant gaze, Bev's words in his head: *you don't have to if you want to*—he realized he couldn't agree with her, even if he should've. Even if he wanted to. But when he thought about it—all of it—the claps and the hollers and Daphne's wounded look because he was hesitating and the fear he could feel crawling up his throat—he thought *fuck it*, and leant over and kissed her.

It lasted less than a second, but the room erupted into applause and wild bouts of laughter; his eyes were shut tight and his fists were clenched, and he kind of felt like passing out but not until he vomited first, but he did it. And he didn't die; didn't explode or burst into flames. When he opened his eyes, Daphne was smiling at him, and then it was over. Just like that, one simple brush of the lips and everyone was ready to move on, and he supposed he was to.

At least, he thought he was, until his legs moved of their own volition, until he was saying, "I'm going to the bathroom" under his breath, until he was out of the room and in the hallway, gasping for air while he fought back a sob. All of it happening so fast, too fast, leaving him with whiplash and a queasy feeling that spread from his stomach to the rest of him like a virus.

His legs carried him to the bathroom, he wanted to scream and cry and catch his breath, but he couldn't do it in the hallway—he needed to be somewhere private—but the door was locked; the bathroom was occupied.

"Shit," he sputtered, tears spilling onto his face despite his best efforts to contain them. His mind was reeling, the only thing in it a single frantic phrase: *what the fuck what the fuck what the fuck*.

When he looked around the hall, the walls were closing in on him, his throat squeezed and then released, his tongue swelled and his heart poked through the cracks in his ribs—he was a balloon filling up, up, up, contained in a space he was quickly outgrowing.

He had to get out, so he outran the feeling—past the living room and the kitchen and stumbled out onto the empty porch; Bill had banned anyone from going outside, afraid of getting the cops called.

Fumbling with the door, he slid it closed, and then flipped so that he could press against the wood frame of the house. He let out frenzied puffs of air, exhaling without inhaling, his lungs filling up with carbon dioxide, choking him.

But he didn't care; he couldn't, not while the rest of his body seemed charged with electricity, the kind that shocked and burned, left him feeling frazzled and prickled his skin. There was a scream trapped in

his chest, stuck between the carbon dioxide built up in his throat and the sob on his tongue. He didn't dare let any of them pass, so they coagulated to become something big, something consuming, and he had to bite down on his fist to keep from yelling out as he slid to the floor.

Knees to his chest, he wrapped his arms around them, cradling them to him. There was no scream and though tears were falling onto his cheeks he refused to sob, even despite how strangled he felt the longer he kept it in. He cultivated the energy into gasping breaths of air, trying and failing to suck down the fresh outside air; but it was humid, about to storm, and so it left him feeling more suffocated than he had before. He knew he was running from the inevitable; this time it was the panic attack that had rooted itself in his veins, sprout its leaves and filled up the hollow spaces between his bones.

But it was okay, it would be okay, because no one would see him this way, no one would hear him cry and when he went back inside no one would notice anything different about him; he would keep it hidden like he did everything else—he had gotten good at that over the years—because no one would know. He was out here alone and—

“Hey, are you—holy shit, Eds?”

—fuck.

Through mist his tears had created, Eddie flinched at the sound of a voice he knew regrettably well. Paralyzed with sheer mortification, he watched as Richie bound up the porch steps, his eyes wide and blinking with visibly distressed at the sight of him.

Words left Eddie, as they so often did when he was around Richie, but this time it was more than the usual stomach-plummeting intimidation Richie triggered. No, that was only the cherry on top of the entire pile of things that had been building since he hung up the phone that morning.

The whole of it—this day and this night—sprang up on him like a shadow in a dark alley—it's a date, chivalry is dead, you're staying for good this time, right?, we aren't in middle school, you don't have to do this—loomed over him dangerously. What made it worse was the fact

that he was entirely sober now that panic had pushed intoxication out of his system, and he had no choice but to listen. To face it. No longer could he lean on the carefree bliss from before, couldn't use it as a crutch, couldn't ignore it as easily as before.

It seemed that Richie served as a manifestation of the whole; he represented the fear and the naivety and the fortitude and the dread, and now he was crouching low, approaching Eddie carefully, speaking to him calmly, asking him things—too many things.

“What happened? Can you breathe? Where’s Bill? Are you—” abruptly, he cut himself off, realizing that he was doing a lousy job at helping. Tacitly, he held up both of his palms, spreading his fingers apart. “How many fingers am I holding up?” He asked, sounding as frantic as Eddie felt.

The scoff Eddie gave was automatic. “I’m n-not blind!” He snapped. “I can’t,” he sucked in sharply, “fucking breathe!” He exclaimed, wincing at how pathetic he sounded. *Stop being such a baby*, he scolded himself, *it isn’t that big of a deal, just fucking breathe!*

But Richie persisted, he kept his hands held up, adamant. “You’re having a panic attack—”

Eddie barked out a breathless laugh. “I had no idea, thanks—”

“You need a distraction,” Richie interrupted him, unbothered that Eddie had laughed in his face so brazenly. “How many fingers am I holding up? Count them—don’t just say ten,” he instructed.

“Fine,” Eddie choked out, gripping the material of his jeans. He sucked in another useless breath and counted Richie’s fingers, one by one, (pretended not to notice the cigarette between his middle and forefinger) until he ended up with ten.

Subconsciously, he couldn’t quite believe that of all people, he was listening to Richie Tozier, following his orders. If he weren’t in the middle of asphyxiating, he would have laughed.

“Count them again,” Richie told him, gently, “out loud this time.”

At that, Eddie gave him a crazed sort of look, but Richie just stared at

him blankly. Patiently waiting for him to do what had been asked of him. So he did. Even though he felt immensely childish, counting to ten out loud, controlling his breaths so that he could say the numbers coherently as if he were a baby that couldn't breathe on his own.

Whenever he finished, Richie made him do it again, and again, until he was more focused on saying the number without his voice wavering than he was regulating his breathing. Until, eventually, he didn't have to think about breathing at all.

Slowly, he regained the ability to inhale and retain oxygen again. As he did, however, Richie insisted he repeat the exercise. Saying, in a too soft and too serious tone, that he "needed to keep his brain occupied." Even though his body had begun to relax, his mind could just as easily flip the switch at the slightest trigger.

(Which Eddie knew, but didn't have the heart to say, because Richie was helping him when he had no moral obligation to. Richie had stopped whatever it was he had been doing to sit beside him and hold his hand (essentially...not literally) while he calmed down.)

Not more than three minutes and several counts to ten and back later, the quiver in Eddie's lip and the tremble in his bones soothed into nothing; dried tears on his cheeks the only sign that anything had been wrong in the first place. All that remained was the very fact that it was Richie who had been able to calm him, which was entirely too ironic, and the fact that fact had ignited some other flighty part of him.

What certainly didn't help it, was that when Eddie allowed himself to acknowledge Richie's eyes on him, he was met by a proud sort of expression on his face. Facial features relaxed around a pleased little smile. Like he was proud of him. Proud of *Eddie*.

Which was, for Eddie, a new thing: Someone else being proud of him —someone that wasn't his dad or Bill. But he wasn't exactly equipped to deal with the way *that* tidbit made his heart stutter at the moment. So he ignored it, and turned to Richie with a blink.

Richie's gaze hadn't left Eddie from the moment he came up the stairs. He met him with an easy smile.

If Eddie's cheeks were burning, he ignored that, too. "Thanks," he said, voice just barely above a whisper, and although the word itself was small the meaning wasn't. Because he did—he meant it.

Because most times, when this happened and nothing else worked, he would sit at the edge of his bed, knuckles white as he gripped his comforter—a futile attempt to find some sort of tether to the world he existed in despite feeling so far from it—and count to fifteen and back until he felt like he could breathe again. However long he had to, he sat, and he waited, counting the seconds and his breaths and beat of his heart in his hollow chest until he felt like a real person again.

Sometimes it took hours; on better days it dissipated within minutes. On not so good days, it never really went away. He just got better at dealing with it. Though his idea of dealing with it was to hide it under the bed and never think about it again.

Thinking about it meant breathing life into it; thinking about it meant that it was real, that it was apart of him, that it always would be. Thinking about it morphed it into something physical, unavoidable and so he learned to run, and fast, and he never stopped running. He didn't think he ever would.

Because, he did feel better. He could breathe, his heart respected its confines in his chest, his veins were no longer filled with electricity and the white noise between his ears had dulled to a quiet hum. And it was because of Richie. So he said thanks and he meant it.

Across from him, Richie's smile remained, maybe grew a fraction bigger. Behind the smudged lenses of his glasses, his eyes glowed and Eddie's heart skipped a beat or two, but he decided it was a result of the languishing panic in his chest. "Course," he replied, pushing his legs out in front of him and plopped down onto the deck, wrapping his arms around his ankles as he leaned forward.

Silence veiled them yet again.

Eddie's mind, however, was far from silent. There were far too many things to process; the strangeness of the whole ordeal especially tricky.

It was strange for Eddie to be sitting there and Richie to be doing the same just inches away, for Eddie to be in the moment and be in it with Richie, for them to have to share it. He knew it wasn't a big deal, it shouldn't have been, but it was and as he sat with his back straight against the wall and Richie sat up with nothing but his arms to support him, he came to the conclusion that he couldn't remember the last time they had spent any fragment of time alone. Maybe, he would have wondered why, too—

—but he had known why for almost ten years.

When Eddie looked at Richie—peeking at him from beneath his drying eyelashes—he caught him placing the cigarette from between his fingers between his lips. With a wary eye, Eddie wondered if he was going to light it.

He didn't.

Instead, he moved it to the edge of his mouth, his tongue poking out to slide it over, and brought his legs up so that he could lean forward and place his elbows against his knees. And then, he looked at Eddie, some unreadable emotion on his face, and he opened his mouth in a slow movement that read to Eddie as hesitation, apprehension almost, and just as he got the first syllable out, the door was opening behind him and their moment that wasn't a moment dissipated with the breeze.

“Eddie!” Bev’s voice.

At the sound of it, he and Richie snapped their heads toward her, equally as startled as the other. Like they had been caught. Hands in the cookie jar, mid-reach, pulling out what wasn't theirs.

“Are you okay? We've been looking for you for like, five minutes!” She breathed, her eyebrows drawn together in a very clear display of distress.

Then, Bill’s head poked out from beside her. “Eddie?” He frowned. Upon finding Richie, too, his frown deepened. “Richie?”

All at once, four heads turned to frown at Richie—their missing link.

Alternatively, Eddie turned his down to stare at his hands.

In one motion, Richie stood from the ground and pulled Bill toward him, and in another quick sweep, grabbed both sides of his neck and placed two, wet kisses to each of his cheeks. “Fredo!” He bellowed. “You rang?”

Bill’s reaction was obscured when Bev stuck her head in Eddie’s line of sight. Brows furrowed, lips tugged downward. Her hands on his, gentle, approaching him like he was a wounded deer. “What happened?” She asked, and he knew she didn’t mean between him and Richie—which was nothing—by the way she asked it, a silent, *is there something going on?*

Swallowing the dry lump suddenly lodged in his throat, he shook his head. “Nothing,” he lied—his first of many that summer. “I’m okay.” He told her, and as he stood from the ground he gave Richie a sideways glance that Bev didn’t follow. “Just needed some air.”

But Richie found him first, so they met each other in the middle. Over Bill’s shoulder, Richie threw him a wink, and Eddie caught it—sole reason being that he knew what it meant; it was an understanding. Some secret thing between them.

(It wouldn’t be the last.)

Notes for the Chapter:

hi! it's been a minute!

writing this chapter was a FEAT. and im sorry it took me this long to get it to you. but i hope this makes up for it! the next few chapters are going to be fun and have been planned out for months so i hope everyone is strapped in...

feedback is always always always appreciated. let me know if ur enjoying it or if i'm making it entirely too boring. i want to know! i love hearing your thoughts. and everyone's comments on chapter one warmed me more than the sun.

thank you in advance... until next time ♥

* frank is quoting john wayne in the beginning. he's like not a good dude but i imagine, like most dads in the 90s, he was a fan

* bev is singing along to emotions by mariah carey

* and the fredo kiss is from the godfather for anyone wondering!

3. Suburban Dream

Summary for the Chapter:

“Your chariot,” he said with a bow.

“Sure,” Eddie replied, eyeing Richie with a raised brow while he climbed into the passenger seat, trying hard not to think about the straw wrappers and empty water bottles and discarded receipts and general *clutter* of what was so clearly *Richie Tozier’s* car, trying *harder* not to think about that, too—that this was Richie’s car, and that he was in it—and busied himself with the crack in the windshield, and wondering how this Richie could be so different from the Richie he had seen the other night; this Richie was saturated and annoying, like Eddie knew him to be, not cautious and careful like the version he had met on the porch.

Notes for the Chapter:

ring a ding ding here is chapter three!

If Eddie spent the following days obsessing over Bill’s party, no one but him had to know.

Besides, it wasn’t like it was his fault—he had little to no control over what things his mind chose to tirelessly analyze. Ever since he was young, his mind had been a stubborn thing, working of its own volition, entertaining thoughts and ideas that more often than not, he didn’t even want to entertain. Yet his mind fixated on them; the daunting or penniless or ludicrous thoughts. Thoughts like, what if the shadow in the corner of his room actually was a demon? What if he really was adopted like his cousins said? What if Richie Tozier wasn’t such a thorn in his side after all? What if what if *what if*?

The truth was that Eddie’s mind could probably curate enough what if’s to complete an entire novel. There were certainly more than 60,000 words worth of them; he knew without a doubt that if he

were to sit down and painstakingly write out each one that he would walk away with more than 240 pages (and a muscle cramp in his hand.) If worrying and wondering were an Olympic Sport, he would win the gold medal. (Or the silver, if his mother were competing—she would certainly walk away with the top title; wipe out all other competition with one wrinkle of her brow.) If it could be performed as a talent in a talent show, he would earn first place. Worrying was in his nature, wondering in his blood.

In Eddie's defense, there were heaps of things in life to worry and wonder about. Just how many germs were on the average door handle? Could Bill *really* understand integrals of rational functions? If he ever ran away from home, *could* he just leave a note? Possibilities and answers were always endless, always circumstantial—how often was the door used? Did Bill have a tutor? What would he put in the note? and so the wheels kept turning, and as long as there was gas in the motor, the vehicle that was his brain could run forever.

Just so, there were heaps of things to consider—or reconsider—when the events of That Night looped around his temporal lobe. What had Richie been doing before he found Eddie on the porch? Why was he outside to begin with? Was he out there all night? What would he have said if Bev and Bill hadn't interrupted? *Why did it matter? Why did he care?*

Although he had a hard time thinking of Richie as anything *but* a minor inconvenience, he knew that what had happened—which was barely *anything*—was simple. Easily explained when the blocking of the scene was taken into evidence. It had been a case of the common phenomenon that was: Right Place, Right Time; Richie caught Eddie on the porch in the middle of what was well on its way to becoming a monstrous panic attack, and with knowledge he somehow possessed, stopped it. That was all—Eddie knew that. Right place, right time. Perfectly situational. Nothing to mull over, nothing to write home about.

But on top of that, he also knew that Richie did not have to offer his help. He could have just as easily turned away and left Eddie to deal with it on his own. It wasn't like he was obligated to help, and it certainly wasn't like Eddie wanted him to feel obligated at all. But, as it were, Richie didn't walk away and he didn't leave Eddie to his own

devices. He stayed. He helped. And maybe it was just that he was a good person—better than Eddie, anyway. Operated on the kindness of his own heart and all that. Maybe.

Eddie didn't know. He didn't know Richie.

Really, they hardly knew each other—at least anymore. There had been a time, sure, that Eddie had thought of him as a friend. When they were younger and loving Bill was more than enough to bond them. But that was then, back when Richie could stick a quarter between his two front teeth (as he so often did in hopes of making Eddie laugh—he did. Once) and there was a fanny pack glued to Eddie's midsection. Now—well. Things were different. Richie didn't have a gap in his teeth anymore, and Eddie had thrown his fanny pack out years ago.

They were different.

Adding layers to what was soon to be a lopsided cake, Eddie was also dedicatedly curious about what Richie had planned to say before their friends found them. Which, in of itself, was a useless thing to be. Because knowing Richie, it probably wasn't going to be anything worthwhile. At least, that was what Eddie told himself—when his heart had skipped a beat at the memory and his cheeks had warmed at all the what if's that, once again, populated the space between his ears.

But Richie had seemed nervous—apprehensive, was the better term—in that split second they had after Eddie calmed down and it had been just the two of them, sharing the night with each other.

He never did get to find out. Bev and Bill ushered Eddie back inside and Richie opted out; “Need to smoke this,” he told them, waving around the cigarette between his fingers. “I’ll be up in a jiffy,” was what he said, because apparently he said stuff like that, but it was a lie; they didn't see him for the rest of the night.

An hour or so later after he decided that waiting up for Richie was pointless (that was what he was waiting for, wasn't it?), Eddie had claimed Bill's bedroom and promptly fell asleep. At some point, Bev and Mike clambered into bed with him, and they slept until Bill woke

them up at noon, stuttering about the mess downstairs and his missing Taboo buzzer.

“Sh, Bill,” Bev had stage whispered to him, in between the mess of limbs that were Mike and Eddie, “relax. You need cuddles.” She told him, and Eddie felt her lift an arm to pull him on top of them.

Groggy with sleep and probably a hangover, too, Eddie nodded in agreement. Mostly because for once in his life, there was not a bone in his body that wanted to worry about anything.

Bill, however, did not agree with her.

“Bev,” he hissed, “I d-don’t have t-t-t-t—*fucking time*—to cuddle. My parents are going to be home in *an hour!*”

Then, in a literal blink of an eye, they were up and out of bed, wide awake with panic, scrambling around collecting trash, articles of clothing (“Is this your mom’s *underwear*?” “*Dude! Why?*”), and a few unidentifiable items (that were undoubtedly better left unidentifiable) from around the house and the backyard. Through all the chaos, Eddie had no time to question the whereabouts of their seventh member—and neither did anyone else. It wasn’t until Ben said something while Stan was packing the trash bags into his station wagon that anyone seemed to notice.

“Did Richie ever come back last night?” Ben asked, his brow crinkling with slight worry. No, Eddie’s brain had supplied immediately, *he didn’t*. He pretended to be too busy with securing the knots on the bags to pay attention to the question in hopes that someone else would answer and save him the curious looks he would receive if he did.

Thankfully, Bev came to his rescue.

“Nope. He probably walked home. You know how he gets when...” in his peripheral, he caught Stan give a curt head shake, and Bev cut herself short. “I think he said he had to go home early.” It was a lie, and Eddie couldn’t tell if she was protecting him or Richie from the truth. Or both. He decided he wasn’t going to read into it.

He finally came home around two in the afternoon and found his dad tending to his growing garden as he wheeled his bike toward the driveway. There was a streak of dirt on his cheek and his clothes were caked in mud. Eddie snorted out loud.

Which brought his dad's immediate attention to him, and upon seeing Eddie, he paused to shoot him a smile and naturally, a joke about his wild night that Eddie had entertained if only to play into the facade that he had mastered for what he thought of as Chicago Eddie: Chicago Eddie was happy-go-lucky, sometimes even optimistic. He had friends and scrapes on his knees and holes in his jeans. Rarely angry, scared of nothing—Chicago Eddie was fearless; mostly, he had everything that Real Eddie sought after: friends, freedom, *fantasy*.

Not to say that Chicago Eddie wasn't Real Eddie; he was simply an extension, a small fraction of him that only existed when he was there, when he was with his Dad and his friends; huddled around the TV in the living room or at Fremont's diner downtown, kicking up dirt at the sandlot or squished in the bed of Mike's truck. Real Eddie—the one that had no friends, had no freedom, was a stark difference to Chicago Eddie. Almost unrecognizable.

Real Eddie was a dutiful, half-glass-empty pessimist that had no friends and hadn't been allowed to wear denim since he was in the eighth grade (and developed a rash on his legs after he lost balance on his bike and tumbled into the Kenduskeag and chafed all the way home.) All he had was the fantasy that was Chicago. No matter how real it was, he knew it just pretend. Make believe—when he was there, he was fulfilling a dream. His mother told him such, and it was the only thing from her mouth that he ever believed; Chicago was his stage and his dad, Bill, and his friends were his cast-mates, the stagehands. All of them coming together once a year to put on the show that was Eddie Kaspbrak's *Midsummer's Suburban Dream*. Make believe.

"How's your head?" His dad called to him as he stood from the ground with a groan, dusted himself off only to dirty the front of his jeans. When he noticed, he gave a little shrug and laughed to himself—Eddie watched him with an amused twinkle in his eye. *If only Mom could see you*, he thought. Face first in a bunch of dirt, surrounded by

it, covered in it—she would have a heart attack. *Think of the germs!* *Think of the bugs!* *Think!* *Think!* *Think!*

Eddie shrugged and forced a smile. “Foine, sir,” he replied in an awfully cliche New York accent (thorn in his side...) with an obedient nod.

Eyes alight with diversion, his dad let out a belly laugh at that. “Aye, you tell Billy and the kids I said hell-uh?” Expectedly, he produced a replica of Eddie’s own terrible impression, but his was more polished, well-seasoned.

““Billy and the kids?”” Eddie snorted.

“Look at me, son,” Frank said seriously, gesturing to his face, “I have wrinkles. Back pain. Crackly bones,” he told him. *“Billy. And. The. Kids.”* He emphasized.

“You make them sound like a boyband,” Eddie pointed out, snickering.

“No, no,” his dad shook his head and a finger at him, “a *joke*, buggie. *Billy*, like a goat, ya see? And kids as in—”

“—baby goats, Dad. I got it!” Shaking his head, Eddie walked into the garage with a smirk. He propped his bike up in the corner of the garage and then joined his dad in the garden. “So. Whatcha working on?”

“Oh, nothin’ really. Mrs. Tinny suggest I grow some tomatoes, so I was just helping them get settled in. Introducing them to their neighbors and such!” His dad exclaimed, and then laughed at his own (lame) joke, and Eddie had no choice but to laugh, too. And then he wanted to know how to tell which plant from the next, and his dad was more than happy to tell him, and they spent close to an hour in the garden, the two of them crouching low and Eddie listening as he was told how he could identify a plant by its leaves, and for once, his brain was quiet.

june fourteenth, 1994

At the sound of an alarm blaring, Eddie jolted upright abruptly as if someone had thrown cold water on him. In act of rebellion—in which he was rebelling the incessant beeping going on somewhere in his room—he reached out with his eyelids glued shut and threw out an arm around blindly on his nightstand, in search of the source. Thinking it was his alarm, he slammed down on the button as soon as he found it.

But no such luck—the beeping continued.

“No,” he refused with a groan—refusing the alarm and the morning and the day, too. Exhaustion clung to his eyes, his head, his body, and although he had spent all of yesterday doing nothing but mindlessly busying himself with daytime television and the new Amazing Spider-Man comic his dad had picked up for him (“Think of it as a late graduation gift,” he had said when he handed it over, giddy grin on his face), he was somehow tired enough to sleep eight hours and wake up wanting more.

Back home, he was never allowed to sleep in. Despite his mother’s favorite place being her Lay-Z-Boy in the living room—it was where she ate every meal, painted her nails, knit her sweaters, watched her shows and most nights, where she slept—Sonia Kaspbrak was not against venturing into the kitchen at six AM sharp (daily) to bang around loud enough for long enough, until Eddie was bounding down the steps, cowlick untamed and a twitch in his eye.

His father, however, had always valued sleep. And he understood like he understood most things, that sleeping in during summer was a rite of passage; in the same way that going to the lake or having a bonfire was. Cliche as they may be, they were things that nearly everyone expected to do in the summer, and while he was home, he was going to make sure he indulged in them and then some.

Just not today.

With another throaty groan, Eddie flung back against his bed and reluctantly opened his eyes. Somewhere in his room, the rhythm of digital beeping persisted, but he ignored it as he attempted to rub the

tired out of his eyes. It was futile—the tired was there to stay.

He blinked up at his ceiling and let out a sigh—*stucco. Not popcorn. Here. Not there.*—and with Derry dampening his thoughts like a storm cloud, he patted around his bed until he found what he realized was making the alarm.

His watch.

He bit down on his tongue, wincing at the repetitive tone; it seemed louder now that he had the watch between his fingers. It wasn't long before he was glaring at the little device in his hand, a piece of technology so small and exteriorly insignificant that it seemed ridiculous to him how much it represented.

In between his thumb and forefinger, he held a symbol of obedience, of order and control—an extension of his mother, he realized, when she had accepted that she wouldn't always be there to keep an eye on him, to yank the string that moved his limbs, to operate him. A reminder that no matter how far he went—across the street, to the Barrens, to Chicago—she would be there, watching, waiting, keeping time on him.

It was her gift to him when he turned eleven—the fall of 1986; the year he had broken his arm falling out of a tree in Bill's backyard—her only gift to him. Aside from a kiss that was too wet and a hug that was too tight, the watch had been it. "Now you'll remember when to take your medicine," she told him with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. He hated that smile. "I've already preset the alarms. You just make sure you keep your pills with you, hear?" And Eddie had accepted her words with a nod and her present with a restrained but always polite *thank you, Mama* and then, after telling her that he wanted to mess around with the settings a bit, he climbed up the stairs and locked himself in his room and stared at his ugly, yellow popcorn ceiling and cried until he fell asleep.

At the memory, his throat constricted and there was a tightness in his chest that felt an awful like a fist had surrendered his heart. With shaky fingers, he pressed the little button on the side to silence the alarm. But his mother's voice was harder to silence; he could hear her words—her orders—so clearly it was as if she were in the room,

speaking directly into his ear: *Time for your pills, Eddiebear, remember to take your medicine, make sure they still have your account on file there, take them every morning—with your breakfast.* An accusatory finger digging into the meat of his heart: *Time for your pills. Time to take your medicine. Every morning.*

And it was ironic, kind of, how despite what he knew, despite what he had discovered and what he had done—had been doing—in light of that knowledge, that her words weighed him down more than they ever had; because before, they had just been rules and regulations, things he thought she had to say because she wanted him to be healthy; she wanted him to be safe. She was his mother after all, and weren’t mothers meant to be protective? Weren’t they supposed to do whatever they could to protect their children? He guessed that was what she was doing. Or, rather, what she thought she was doing. But they were lies—things she told him to manipulate him, convince him of things that just weren’t true; bend him in directions only she wanted him to go; shape him into configurations only she drew the stencil for. They were lies, and they were heavy ones, the sort of lies that pulled at his core and dragged him down, down, down, until he was sinking into the ground. Empty words—that was all that they were, all they had ever been—and yet he was laden by their severity.

In an instant, he was up and out of his bed. And even though his father had left for work already, he snuck down the hall and into the bathroom. He retrieved the two bottles from the medicine cabinet and divvied out the same amount he always did—had been since before he could really remember. Four white capsules sat idly in his palms, looking as inconspicuous as usual. Staring up at him, mocking him as he turned toward the toilet. You won’t do it, they sang, their endless song, you’re too scared. Too afraid. You can’t do it. But he would and he could, so forcing out a breath he didn’t know he had been holding, he stepped toward the toilet, his muscles tense and without much thought, dropped the pills into the toilet. Quickly, he flushed them down, and down they went, until they were swallowed down.

For a moment, he stood there shaking; some overwhelming sense that there were eyes on him—the watch in his other hand, his mother—but this was nothing new. He hadn’t taken a pill in years; not since he learned the truth (Greta Bowie with her sneering face—They’re placebos, they’re fake, water-sugar pills) and not long after he did, he developed a lie of his own.

Every morning, afternoon and night, he hid a pill or two underneath his tongue, lodged between it and his back molars, and kept them there until he excused himself to “wash his hands” and dropped them down the drain.

A technique he learned and stuck to for days, weeks, months, years—for so long, he had been pretending to take the medicine his mother swore he needed, that if he didn’t he would fall deathly ill, he was fragile, didn’t he see? He was smaller, weaker. Not like everyone else. Not like the other kids.

Not like the other kids. He learned that, too, long ago—that he was different. But he didn’t think it had anything to do with his inability to breathe properly (although he probably could have, at one point, before his lungs grew dependent on the inhaler he chucked into the quarry some summers ago.) Sure, he was different, but not the way his mother thought. Not the way she wanted. It was something she couldn’t control—but that didn’t stop her from trying.

Sometimes that terrified him.

Cautiously, like if he moved any faster someone might shoot him dead, he craned his neck to catch whatever nonexistent, prying eyes his paranoid mind told him were tracking his every move. But when he scanned his surroundings—the empty bathroom, the empty hallway and the empty kitchen—he came up with nothing. There wasn’t anything, there was no one. He was alone and he was safe. No one would catch him—he could breathe. Something he was getting better at it; every inhale and exhale came easier than the last. Maybe he would be good at it one day. Maybe.

Just then, however, there was a knock at his front door. And at the sound, his entire body went stiff with apprehension. His neck grew warmer and warmer as a creeping sense of being caught red handed crawled up his spine. Logically, he knew that it was not his mother at the door—she did not possess a sixth sense in which she knew when Eddie was disobeying her and she could not teleport—but still, he froze, terrified that the fist that rapped against the door belonged to his mother. The image of her standing there on the front porch was a vivid one: bloodshot eyes wet with tears, blotchy cheeks and a sputtering mouth as she sobbed, calling out to him through them—“You’re hurting me, Eddie!”—and it left him paralyzed.

It wasn't until the knocks sounded again that Eddie was ripped from the visual and thrown back into the present, where he stood motionless in the middle of the hallway digging his nails into his palms and there was someone at his front door. Someone who was not his mother. Someone who was probably looking for his father—not for him. Answer the door! a voice scolded him, and so he did as it commanded, and walked toward the front door in calculated steps.

By the time he reached it, the knocking had stopped, but the rate in which his heart was beating had quickened its pace with a vengeance. Anxiety coursed through his veins and shocked his nerve endings. There was something screaming at him to walk away, to leave the door unopened, but he was already there, one motion away from answering it. So he opened the door, with sweaty palms and an electrified heart, holding his breath.

And on the other side was quite possibly the last person he was expecting to see that day—or for a while, truthfully.

At the sight of him, all Eddie could do was blink. All at once, his terror was replaced by an entirely different emotion charged by anxiety.

More nervous than he had been last night when Daphne leaned in to kiss him, his stomach flopped around in this stomach like a fish out of water as he stared blankly at Richie Tozier, who stood on his front doorstep, dressed in a bright orange Crush t-shirt and a pair of too-baggy light wash jeans, sporting stained Converse. He looked all sorts of haphazard, and he flashed Eddie the same smile he had given him just days before on Bill's back porch.

Again, Eddie blinked.

If he were polite or attuned to social cues, he would have smiled back, but he was apparently incapable of regular human function. Instead, he gaped at Richie, like an idiot. Too many questions filled his brain but there were no words available to ask them. So he thought them, quite loudly, and let his eyebrows furrow in question as he wondered: What are you doing here? and hoped that somehow, Richie would understand.

"Howdy, Spaghetti Western!" he greeted in a cheap Cowboy type voice, and Eddie couldn't even find it in him to repulse at the awful nickname

and accompanying accent. “Hope you don’t mind me barging in like this, but I’ve been sent to corral you.” He told him and pointed to finger guns at him, and for the third time, Eddie blinked up at the living, breathing anomaly in front of him.

“Corral me?” Eddie squeaked out, sounding outright pathetic but he couldn’t be bothered to care about that. He was far too caught up in caring about the way seeing Richie made him feel—red-handed, guilty, culpable—and how to diffuse the heat gathering on his cheeks.

Momentarily, Richie stared at him, and Eddie shifted uncomfortably under the scrutiny of his gaze. It occurred to him right then that he was still in his pajamas—a matching set his mother had gifted to him for Christmas—and had done approximately nothing to rid his appearance of sleep; his hair was a wild mess of unkempt waves and there were bags under his eyes and creases on his face from where his pillow left its mark. He knew he looked like a mess, and that he looked like a mess in front of Richie. Because of it, he inwardly wished he was a bodiless entity.

“We’re going to the sandlot,” Richie finally said in a casual tone, like Eddie was supposed to know that—although he guessed he sort of did, just didn’t know it was today. “Bill asked if I could pick you up.”

Eddie gulped, and then, before he could stop it, the question tumbled out of his mouth: “Why?”

There was a second in which Eddie thought Richie looked slightly surprised by his question, as if he hadn’t thought Eddie would even ask it. But the expression went as quickly as it came. He was back to looking nonchalant, as he so often did, and gave another shrug, this time indifferently. “Because Bill’s a bossy bastard? Hell if I know, Eds,” he paused, and when his eyes trailed over Eddie’s entire body, Eddie froze. “Is that what you’re wearing?” Richie asked him with a smirk.

Still frozen, all Eddie could do, yet again, was fucking blink. “What?”

Snorting, Richie pointed at his outfit. Eddie glanced down to give himself a once over—Oh, right. The pajamas. Kill me.

“Are the stockings hung by the chimney with care?” Richie asked through his laughter, like he just couldn’t help himself. “Are the children nestled in

their beds? Where's Ma in her kerchief? Your cap?"

A frown settled on Eddie's face then, as he glared at Richie with narrowed eyes. There was a phantom pain in Eddie's side, instantly. The thorn was back and just like that, the clock reversed; nothing had changed, as if the events of the party never took place. He didn't know what he was expecting, or why he was expecting anything in the first place, when nothing had even happened anyway, but he had no time to be reflective, because Richie was still quoting 'Twas the Night Before Christmas and all of his nerves had been replaced with extreme irritation.

"You're hilarious," Eddie deadpanned while Richie laughed at him unabashedly. If his heart was thumping in his chest, well, that secret was safe with him. "You should be a comedian. Anyone ever tell you that?"

That got Richie to stop, if only for a moment. He tilted his head to the side and squinted at Eddie curiously. "Yeah, actually, Mags tells me all the time," and Eddie assumed he was referring to his mother.

"Then she's a liar," he concluded with a sweet, condescending smile.

Then, he shut the door in Richie's gawking face and hurried into his room to change into something he didn't mind ruining with dirt. He rummaged through his suitcase for an outfit, fingers shaking the slightest bit because his actions had caught up with him—he insulted Richie and then slammed the door in his face; he could only hope that he knew it was only a joke.

Mostly a joke.

In truth, Eddie couldn't remember what had even happened—he was so nervous he might as well have blacked out, let his mind and mouth run on cruise control while he hid in the back and cowered.

Finally, after a voice in the back of his mind nagged at him to hurry up and just pick something, he swapped his pajamas out for a faded t-shirt and a pair of jeans that Beverly had sewn a patch with a little smiley face into last summer (and he kept hidden from his mother) after he had torn them at the sandlot, so it only seemed fitting he wore them there today. He threw on the battered converse he kept in his closet specifically for his visits during the summer and nearly tripped over himself as he ran down the hall.

When he opened the door, Richie was still there waiting for him; an unlit cigarette between his lips and a lighter in his hands. Like the night of the party, Eddie wondered if he was going to light it, and again, he didn't—simply pushed it to the corner of his mouth with his tongue and left it there.

"Aw shucks, you didn't get all dolled up for me, did ya?" he joked after he looked over at Eddie, fanning himself and batting his eyelashes.

Eddie's stomach plummeted into the ground and buried itself beneath the soil at the implication. He bit down on his tongue to avoid saying something stupid and forced himself to roll his eyes instead. He looked past Richie and to the Jetta parked in front of his house.

"That yours?" He asked, gesturing to the car with a nod.

Richie followed his gaze and turned back to him with a proud look. "Sure is. That's Sherbie. Paid for her all by myself. Isn't she a beaut?" He sighed dreamily, and started down the porch steps.

That's one word for it, Eddie thought as he followed Richie's lead. Out loud he said, "Sherbie?"

"Yeah, like Herbie, but since she's a girl—Sherbie." Richie explained, like that made all the sense in the world.

"Original," Eddie commented sarcastically as they both approached the car. Just as he reached out to open the passenger door, Richie held out an arm.

"Ah ah ah!" He shouted, startling Eddie enough to make him jump. But Richie didn't notice; he was occupied by unlocking the door with his keys. "Hold your balls, there, Mr. K. I have the magic keys," and then, after jiggling them a bit, he jerked it open and gestured to it with a flourish. "Your chariot," he said with a bow.

"Sure," Eddie replied, eyeing Richie with a raised brow while he climbed into passenger seat, trying hard not to think about the straw wrappers and empty water bottles and discarded receipts and general clutter of what was so clearly Richie Tozier's car, trying harder not to think about that, too—that this was Richie's car, and that he was in it—and busied himself with

the crack in the windshield, and wondering how this Richie could be so different from the Richie he had seen the other night; this Richie was saturated and annoying, like Eddie knew him to be, not cautious and careful like the version he had met on the porch.

Eddie realized, watching Richie slide into the driver's seat and slap his thighs and then the dashboard as if to warm himself and the car up, that he had no idea which side to believe. Richie during the day, when the world was bright and he matched it, or Richie at night, still glowing but in a different way, reflection of his own light. It disoriented him—to see this Richie but remember the other, to have seen that part and then yanked back at the sight of this part, but it dawned on him, sitting there in the passenger seat, that if he were allowed two halves, Richie was, too.

The sandlot on Rosewood was, more or less, where a young Eddie Kaspbrak had spent most of his summer's. Day in and day out, as long as the sun was in the sky, Eddie and Bill—in the years prior to Richie and Stan and Bev and Ben and Mike—biked from their neighborhood, passed Sonny Acres and Scooby's and followed the trail down to Wheaton Academy's neglected baseball field. They spent their summer days doing there what they couldn't at home: for Bill, that meant complaining about Georgie ("He cries about *everything!*" "...Isn't that what babies are supposed to do?") while the two of them tossed the ball back and forth, and for Eddie, it meant whining about Derry while they ran bases, trying to outrun one another until they collided and fell laughing onto the dirt.

It was the one place they felt impenetrable; they were safe from worries and adults and, maybe most importantly, Henry Bowers and his gang of likeminded meathead goons. Not once had they ever tracked them to the baseball field, and so, it was declared as their unspoken safe haven; a place to run to when they needed to. A place they could make their own. Which they had no difficulty in doing; they carved their initials into the home team's dugout and when Bill discovered the cabinet beneath one of the benches, they had stuffed their own bats and gloves and even old comics and whatever else they felt necessary to keep there until they filled it to the brim of

their stuff. Far as they saw it, that field was more theirs than it was Wheaton's.

Of course, it had only belonged to just him and just Bill for one summer—because the next year, Eddie was introduced to Stan and Richie, who Eddie distinctly remembered regarding as the shrunken businessman and the overgrown toddler, an odd pair. But they worked, and the four of them worked, too. Even if Stan had a weird sense of humor and Richie was obsessed with telling really bad jokes (that always made Eddie laugh, but he would never admit to that).

With Bev, four became five—Eddie had met her for the first time at the baseball field, when Richie came racing down the trail with her clutching to his shoulders, perched on the pegs, her braided hair flowing behind her as she screeched with laughter, looking freer than Eddie thought anyone could look before he saw her. But she was a *girl*, and that alone was enough to twist his intestines into one giant knot.

Bill, who had always been able to read Eddie like a book, leaned over and whispered when he saw the pinch between his brows. “D-Don’t worry,” he had said into his ear as they sat in the dugout, “she’s suh-super cool. R-Richie pretends she’s his g-g-girlfriend, but really they’re j-just friends. She’s one of us—y-you’ll like her,” and Eddie hadn’t been sure; he never knew what to make of girls. They seemed alright from far away, but when he got too close, he would clam up and there was a whirlwind of nerves in his stomach. But Bev had skipped right up to him and introduced herself by complimenting his shirt (his favorite at the time, with the words Hot Rod on the front) and then, she struck Stan out, who was by far the best batter, and Eddie decided she was really cool. Like, Wonder Woman cool. She still was.

Their group of five turned into six when Eddie met Ben the following summer on Fourth of July; he spent the entire night sitting beside Eddie on the blanket Bill’s parents had spread out for them, and they spent a surprising amount of time talking about their favorite songs under the bursting sky. The next, it became seven after they met Mike at the waterpark and promptly invited him to Bill’s birthday party that weekend (where they had made the mistake of listening to Richie and tried to play Bloody Mary at three in the morning, scaring

Stan so bad he had to go home early) and he fit in almost too well, like he had been the last missing piece and now that they had found him, they had completed the puzzle.

And then, because life had a funny way of changing like the seasons: with a simple turn of the Earth, everything changed. Stan and Richie started going to sleep away camp and Bev and Ben went to summer school and Mike took over most of the farm upkeep and then it was back to square one: just him and just Bill. Which he had no qualms about—Bill was his best friend. His person. But he still couldn't help but feeling like something was missing, and now that he had had a taste of what having a group of friends felt like he found it hard to regress. Of course, he knew somewhere underneath all of the *worry worry worry* that they were all still friends. Still, he felt like he missed out on so much. He didn't live in Chicago, he only visited. He didn't go to their school or hang out at their houses or study with them. He didn't call them whenever he wanted or hang out with them even when Bill wasn't there—so could he really call them *his* friends?

He had been battling that thought for years, now, and still, at eighteen, he didn't have an answer. He knew that if he brought it up to any of them, especially Bill, they would argue that they were undoubtedly his friends, too, but he also knew that it wasn't necessarily true. Without Bill, they wouldn't work. He was their glue, and Eddie understood that better than anyone. Bill was the link keeping them together, and he had to respect that. Didn't he?

But, as he was learning, not everything in life was irreversible. He could survive without his pills, he could breathe without his inhaler, and he could be happy even after everything life had thrown at him. What was one more reversible thing?

Which brought him back to the spike between his ribs—the thorn in his side—currently presenting itself as a tone-deaf Richie Tozier as he sang (read: screamed) along to the God awful sound of Amy Grant's "Baby, Baby" on their way to the field.

As a result, Eddie had his hands clamped down over his ears and a scowl on his face, leaning away from Richie's inescapable howling. Somehow, he found himself missing the queasy *I-wish-I-was-invisible* feeling from earlier.

“Come on, it’s a good song!” Richie whined over the last chorus just before blasting it. Desperate for an out, Eddie pulled on the handle only to find that it was locked.

“I will jump out of the car!” Eddie yelled, yanking on the handle aggressively.

Richie either couldn’t hear him or, more plausibly, was blatantly ignoring him, and continued to harmonize along with the now (thankfully) fading melody of what was possibly the worst song of the decade. Through his peripheral, Eddie watched (rather bitterly) as Richie tossed his head around, his hair flying with the motions, and popped his shoulders to the rhythm obnoxiously.

“Glad that you’re miiiiine,” he bellowed out, and Eddie cringed almost involuntarily, “Baby I’m so glad!” he shouted, and then, with one last flourish, the song was done, and Eddie prayed to whoever was listening that Richie was, too.

Fortunately for both Eddie and his wellbeing (*and* his eardrums), Richie pulled over to the side of the road and cut the engine before another song could start, thus preventing another torture session. As soon as the door unlocked (because even though it had to be opened with a key, it could be opened from the inside, and nothing about Richie or his car made any kind of sense), Eddie bolted out of his seat and shut the door with a glare shot Richie’s way.

“Thanks for the ride,” he bit out, “but I think I’ll walk home.”

At that, Richie laughed—a genuine laugh, like he thought Eddie was joking. Which he certainly was not. “You’re an Amy Anti,” he commented out loud, “noted...” and then he walked over to Eddie’s side, where he stood glaring. As soon as he was close enough, he reached out and pulled Eddie into his side—and Eddie wondered if he felt like something was digging into the cracks of his ribs, too.

Typically, he would shrug Richie off and run to Bill as fast as his legs would carry him, but. They were going to be running all day, so he figured he should preserve his energy. So, he let Richie keep his arm there, for probably the first time ever, and they walked, side by side, toward the field where their friends were already goofing around.

He was robbed of feeling a sense of familial warmth when Richie tilted his head a little too close to Eddie's and said, "we need to get you a good taste in music, Eds."

So much for preserving his energy.

In one swift movement, Eddie wiggled his way out from Richie's arm and forced his legs to move at a quicker pace in order to put some distance between them. "There's nothing wrong with my taste in music," Eddie snapped, incredulous at Richie's uncalled for and untrue remark. Because there *was absolutely nothing* wrong with his taste in music, and this was something he knew for certain, like two plus two was four or that Aroldis Chapman held the fastest pitch record with a hundred and five-point-one miles per hour. Plus, it was Richie that needed help! Who actually liked Bon Jovi anymore?!

"Oh yeah? What's your favorite song, then?" Richie challenged, lengthening his strides to catch up to Eddie, who silently cursed him for being built like human Gumby.

"None of your business," Eddie replied haughtily—he didn't necessarily feel like being made fun of today, and especially not by Richie I-Wear-Pizza-Socks Tozier. They were getting closer to the field, finally, and Eddie had hope that once they were in the presence of everyone else, Richie's focus would likely be on pestering them instead.

But Richie was nothing if not determined. He caught up to Eddie easily, and because he was terrible at catching hints, threw his arm around his shoulders so that he couldn't run away again.

"As the decider of good music taste, it most *coitantly* is my business, Spaghetti-O! Come on, it's Richie T. Records on the air and we want to know your most beloved track, all of West Chicago is dying to know!" He shouted his best impression of a radio host into the summer air, grabbing the attention of Bev and Stan, who were tossing pop-fly's to one another in front of the dugout.

At once, all of Eddie's blood rushed to his face and he knew without having to look that he was as red as the hair atop Bev's head. And again, he pushed Richie's arm off of him, aggravated that he was so

infuriatingly imperceptible to *hints* and that he was suffering at its hand. Sighing, he pinched the bridge of his nose and said, “Keep Passing The Open Windows by Queen,” all in one giant breath. He just hoped that Richie wouldn’t make him repeat himself.

Luckily enough, it seemed that Richie heard him just fine. When Eddie finally willed himself to look at him, he watched as his expression morphed into something that looked more or less impressed with Eddie’s answer.

“Okay fine, you pass,” Richie smirked, and the way he bumped Eddie’s shoulder told him he had been messing around for pretty much their entire conversation, but Eddie couldn’t help but feel like he had just bared apart of his soul with someone he wasn’t sure he trusted it with. But then Richie said, “I’m more of a Great Pretender kind of guy, myself,” and when Eddie caught the honest look in his eyes, he thought maybe Richie was trying to offer a part of himself in return.

Suddenly, it was hard to swallow. Or breathe. Or have coherent thoughts. So, as they approached the dugout, he responded, rather lamely, “That isn’t a Queen song” and let himself look in Richie’s eyes when he said it, and he was surprised at how clearly he could see them through his glasses, that for once weren’t dirtied with smudges or riddled with cracks, and noted the perpetual wideness they seemed to possess behind them. There was no hiding emotions in Richie Tozier’s eyes, Eddie knew; a faint memory played in his mind at that thought, of a younger Richie, of dirtier and older glasses, shattered at the hands of Patrick Hockstetter, blood on the left lens and on his chin and hands.

“Say, you guys think I’ll be this handsome ten years from now?” a twelve-year-old Richie Tozier cheezed, showcasing a mouthful of bloodstained teeth to which Stan, Bill and Eddie especially repulsed at the sight of, as they stood around home plate.

“Jeez-us,” Bill said, reaching out to touch Richie’s red cheek. “Wh-what’d he get yuh-you for this t-t-time?”

Richie shrugged, took off his glasses to wipe the droplets of blood off of them. “Said I was biking on his turf,” he snorted, “and it wasn’t just him.

Patrick was there, too.”

A chill ran down Eddie’s spine. He remembered Patrick. He hadn’t seen him in years, not since the playground back in kindergarten. Even at seven, he had been tall and lanky and had a smile like the Cheshire Cat, like he wanted to devour anyone who he found particularly appetizing. Although he had never bothered Eddie—because that had always been Belch’s job—the sight of him was enough to send Eddie running in the other direction with his tail tucked between his legs.

He felt bad that Richie had to face them at all, but he felt worse that he had to face them alone. And, despite Richie’s best efforts to hide it, Eddie didn’t miss the fright in his eyes or his tearstained cheeks. His heart ached, and he knew he had to do something. He just had to.

“I have,” Eddie suddenly breathed out in one shaky exhale, “I have. Stuff,” he gestured to his fanny pack, “to help. Your face,” his sentences stopped and started like cars in bumper-to-bumper traffic, his breath labored—startled and panicked by the sight of Richie; his swollen eye, busted lip and the blood on his He-Man t-shirt. But wanting to help. Feeling like he should.

Behind cracked glasses, Richie’s eyes seemed to light up at Eddie’s offer. “Golly gee, thanks a billion Spaghetti,” he sniffed, throwing an arm around Eddie’s shoulders and pulling him in close; a sideways halfway hug that Eddie couldn’t bring himself to return, cheeks ablaze, stomach flipping. “Docta K. to save the day!” he rejoiced in a gleeful cry.

For a while after that day—the day Richie had come to them with tears in his eyes (but they never fell to his cheeks because he refused to let them) and dirt on his round cheeks and blood on his crooked teeth—Eddie thought a lot about—well.

He thought a lot about Richie.

Out of sheer curiosity, that is. Because he was an enigma. At least, to Eddie, anyway. Nothing made sense about him. Not the things he said or the way he dressed or carried himself. He was Too Cool, Too Funny, and he could be brash and he was almost always annoying but there was a softness to him, too. Eddie had seen it the day they had first met, and again that day in the baseball field as he sat Richie

down and tended to his wounds. There was a softness in Eddie, too, that day, as he worked on his first patient—his only patient, really.

Summer was a lot of things for Eddie. It was freedom and it was fun, it was lazy days with his dad on the couch and hot ones at the baseball field with Bill and his friends (Eddie never did think he could quite call them his, too), but it was running from Henry Bowers and his gang of bullies, hiding when they'd gotten away, but sometimes they didn't.

Sometimes, Henry and his goons were faster; hungrier; angrier. Sometimes they caught up, and sometimes they didn't lay a hand on them. Sometimes they just took Bill's notebook and tore it half, cut the string to the kite Stan had gotten as a gift for his birthday, Richie's gameboy and chuck it into the nearest puddle, or took Eddie's inhaler and stomped on it until it was nothing but a bunch of plastic shards on the ground. Those were good days—easy days—the kind of days they prayed for when it came to Henry Bowers. But their prayers were rarely answered, and sometimes, *sometimes*, they walked home with limps in their step and dirt-stained clothes and bruises on their skin and tears in their eyes with no words between them because there weren't any to be said.

Richie had always gotten the worst of it, Eddie remembered. Because he could never keep his mouth shut. Eddie often wondered if he liked getting beat on or something, since he never seemed to learn his lesson. He laughed in Henry's face, swung at Vic and Belch, challenged Patrick even though he had a whole foot on him. But he never backed down—not even when there was a fist in his mouth.

Eddie admired him for it.

“Can you guys hurry up?” Bev’s voice interrupted his momentary flashback abruptly. “My clothes are going out of style!” She called to them from the field, two hands cupping her mouth to emphasize her words.

Immediately, Richie turned to her with a sneer as he called back, “too late, Marsh!” When she flipped him off with a dead stare, he simply laughed. Then, turning back to Eddie with a blinding grin, asked, “Ready to eat my dust?” as if it wasn’t common knowledge that

Richie was by far their worst player.

All Eddie could do was laugh in his face. “In your dreams, Tozier,” he affirmed, and without another word, sprinted toward the dugout, where their friends were waiting for them, throwing his head back with a loud cackle at the sound of Richie’s “No fair, you little shit!” from behind him.

Eddie made it to home plate in record timing with a huffing and puffing Richie behind him. He cursed up and down about how Eddie was a cheater and he demanded a rematch—as soon as he could breathe again. He fell flat into the dirt and made a show of breathing in and out big, deep breaths. Eddie purposefully ignored him and stepped around his stretched out body to greet the others.

After he let himself be crushed in a group hug—which was something they did now, apparently—he asked what his position would be (as he usually alternated between third base and the pitcher’s mound). Bill informed him that, as their second-best batter (Stan was undoubtedly the best, but he almost always preferred first base) that he was up to bat. Bev had taken her usual place in the outfield, Ben at shortstop, Mike was the catcher and as per usual, Bill on the pitcher’s mound. All they needed was someone to give them something to play off—which was Eddie’s job. Richie’s job, typically, was heckling from the bench.

Currently, he was heckling on top of the home plate.

“You’re blocking the base,” Eddie said to a still-splayed out and panting Richie.

He lifted an arm, slowly, like he was being weighed down, and squinted up at Eddie through his glasses. “*You’re blocking my view*,” he retorted, but then paused to mull it over. With an overtly smug grin, he let out a sigh and said, “just kidding. I like this one *much* better.”

And if Eddie’s stomach erupted into a butterfly exhibit at Richie’s incredibly ostentatious remark, no one but him had to know that, either.

Notes for the Chapter:

hi ♥

i want to say--first and foremost--thank you to literally everyone who read and commented on chapter two, and to my lovely anon on tumblr who stops by to leave me the sweetest words of encouragement every now and then. it means the literal whole entire world to me that you all read this and leave kudos and comments and i adore all of you. i would *also* like to apologize for the ridiculous amount of time it took me to get chapter three to you, but i appreciate your patience tremendously. this story means a lot to me and that means i obsess over the details a little too much.

that being said: i'm sorry this chapter isn't much, but i promise it isn't all for naught! everything happens for a reason.....when i am in control of those happenings and their reasons. chapter four will be evidence of this... :)

as always, thank you thank you **thank you** for reading. please feel free to leave (nice) comments and ask me anything you want or yell at me if you want--i'm all ears! let me know if i'm boring you or if you feel like i'm missing something (but be NICE...im fragile)

i love u all, u funky little adorable furbies.

until next time! ♥